IS Volume4

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=IS:Volume4

These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 4

Okiura

MF文庫
J
ゆ-01-04

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉④

弓弦イズル

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メディアファクトリー
MEDIA FACTORY

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉④

８月、夏休み開幕！　今回は『女の子たちの夏休み編』！
それぞれ女の子の視点からつづるある夏の日の物語。
気温とともに女子パワーもヒートアップ！　新たな一面をかいま見るオムニバス。
「一夏とひと夏の思い出を――」
そんな願いは果たして叶うのか！？　そのとき隣に立つのは誰なのか！？

「想い」を彩る、ハイスピード学園バトルラブコメ第四弾！
ＩＳバトルはなくても恋のバトルは回避不能！　夏の恋愛争奪戦――開幕！

Ｊ
コミック化
月刊コミックアライブ7月号
(5/27発売)にて
連載開始!
漫画:赤星健次
決定!!

MF文庫J
580

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MF文庫J

弓弦イズルの本

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉［イラスト：okiura］

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉②［イラスト：okiura］

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉③［イラスト：okiura］

IS〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉④［イラスト：okiura］

【著者】

弓弦イズル

ゆみづる・いずる

またしても体調不良とか色々で発売延期…。
申し訳ありません。本当にすみません。
読者の皆さんのおかげでついに４巻です。
あとマンガ化です。いつも応援ありがとう！

今回もokiura先生の絵がスバラシング・ナウなので、
私も楽しくて仕方がありません。
okiura先生は「今は」鈴にぞっこんみたいです。
それにしてもカラーの私服姿が全員スバラシイ。
今回はメイドさん多めで私が大満足です、ハイ。

【イラストレーター】

okiura

おきうら

新進気鋭のイラストレーター。普段は擬人化メカ少女や魔法少女ものを好んでよく描く。
『白銀のローレシアン』(一迅社文庫)の挿絵を担当。また、マクロスA(エース)にて「マクロスF ～しーくれっとびじょんず～」を連載中。

カバーイラスト／okiura　装丁／ヒーローズ

Infinite Stratos 4

Izuru Yumizuru

「アイ・ウビキメ」

「俺の仲間は、誰一人としてやらせねえ！」

「ふぐっ……ひぇ」
「ぅ、ぅ～」

「赤色が足りませんね」

英国式
ワンダフル
お料理レシピ

「斬」

contents

第一話 ウェルカム・イン・ザ・サマー 11

第二話 二匹の子猫のラプソディー 78

第三話 真夏の夜の夢 148

第四話 恋に騒がす五重奏（クインテット） 198

エピローグ 暗がりに潜みし闇苅（くらがり） 256

キャラクター紹介

織斑一夏（おりむらいちか）

「世界で唯一ISを動かせる男子」。
専用IS【白式】。

篠ノ之箒（しののののほうき）

一夏の幼なじみ。
専用IS【紅椿】。

セシリア・オルコット

イギリス代表候補生。
専用IS【ブルー・ティアーズ】。

凰鈴音（ファン・リンイン）

中国代表候補生。
専用IS【甲龍】。

シャルロット・デュノア

フランス代表候補生。
専用IS【R-リヴァイヴ・カスタムII】。

ラウラ・ボーデヴィッヒ

ドイツ代表候補生。
専用IS【シュヴァルツェア・レーゲン】。

口絵・本文イラスト●okiura

あとがき

そんなこんなで

4巻です。

蘭再登場記念。
中学の制服姿(非公式)w
IS学園に
進学とかしないかなぁ
ねん？ララ先生？

CHOCO

4
IN FINITE
STRATOS
インフィニット・ストラトス
弓弦イズル
YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO
OVERLAP

IS
INFINITE STRATOS
4

インフィニット・ストラトス4

弓弦イズル
YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

セシリア「今日という今日は許しませんわ!」

鈴「はっ、やろうっての?――甲龍(シェンロン)!」

ラウラ「あきらめが悪いな」

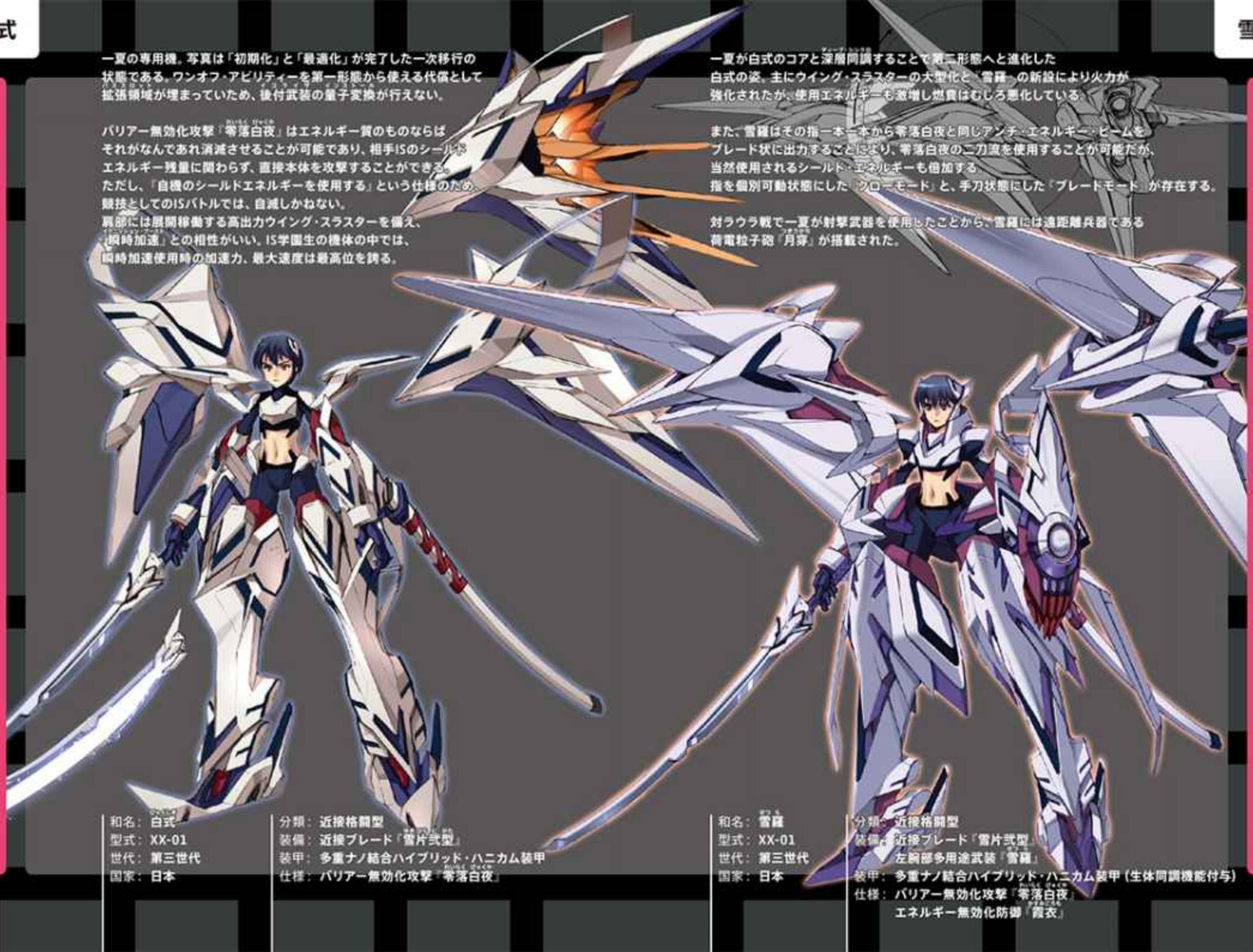
シャル・ラウラ『チェック・メイト』

シャル「まだやる?」

ラウラ「次はその腕を吹き飛ばす」

一夏の専用機。写真は「初期化」と「最適化」が完了した一次移行の状態である。ワンオフ・アビリティーを第一形態から使える代償として拡張領域が埋まっていため、後付武装の量子変換が行えない。

バリアー無効化攻撃『零落白夜』はエネルギー質のものならばそれがなんであれ消滅させることが可能であり、相手ISのシールドエネルギー残量に関わらず、直接本体を攻撃することができる。ただし、「自機のシールドエネルギーを使用する」という仕様のため、競技としてのISバトルでは、自滅しかねない。
肩部には展開稼働する高出力ウイング・スラスターを備え、「瞬時加速」との相性がいい。IS学園生の機体の中では、瞬時加速使用時の加速力、最大速度は最高位を誇る。



和名：白式
型式：XX-01
世代：第三世代
国家：日本

分類：近接格闘型
装備：近接ブレード「雪片弐型」
装甲：多重ナノ結合ハイブリッド・ハニカム装甲
仕様：バリアー無効化攻撃『零落白夜』

一夏が白式のコアと深層同調することで第二形態へと進化した白式の姿。主にウイング・スラスターの大型化と「雪羅」の新設により火力が強化されたが、使用エネルギーも激増し燃費はむしろ悪化している。

また、雪羅はその指一本一本から零落白夜と同じアンチ・エネルギー・ビームをブレード状に出力することにより、零落白夜の二刀流を使用することが可能だが、当然使用されるシールド・エネルギーも倍加する。
指を個別可動状態にした「クローモード」と、手刀状態にした「ブレードモード」が存在する。

対ラウラ戦で一夏が射撃武器を使用したことから、雪羅には遠距離兵器である荷電粒子砲「月穿」が搭載された。

和名：雪羅
型式：XX-01
世代：第三世代
国家：日本

分類：近接格闘型
装備：近接ブレード「雪片弐型」
　　左肩部多用途武装「雪羅」
装甲：多重ナノ結合ハイブリッド・ハニカム装甲（生体同調機能付与）
仕様：バリアー無効化攻撃『零落白夜』
　　エネルギー無効化防御「霧衣」

Maya YAMADA Right

Left Chifuyu ORIMURA

織斑一夏 おりむら・いちか

Ichika ORIMURA

世界で唯一ISを動かせる男子。
専用IS【白式】

篠ノ之箒 しののの・ほうき

Houki SHINONONO

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Lingyin HUANG

シャルロット・デュノア

フランス代表候補生
専用IS【ラファール・リヴァイヴ・カスタムII】

Charlotte DUNOIS

ラウラ・ボーデヴィッヒ

ドイツ代表候補生
専用IS【シュヴァルツェア・レーゲン】

Laura BODEWIG

5 第一話 ウェルカム・イン・ザ・サマー!

71 第二話 二匹の子猫のラプソディー

142 第三話 真夏の夜の夢

192 第四話 恋に騒がす五重奏（クインテット）

249 エピローグ 暗がりに潜みし闇苅（くらがり）

件名

【祝】第4巻発売！

□ラフ □クリンナップ ■あとがき

日付

：2013/
5月だけど気温は真夏。

時刻

：朝焼けか夕焼けか判らない。

CHOCO
MUGITANI KOICHI
http://chocolateshop-float.com

果たして俺はいつからここに居たのだろうか？

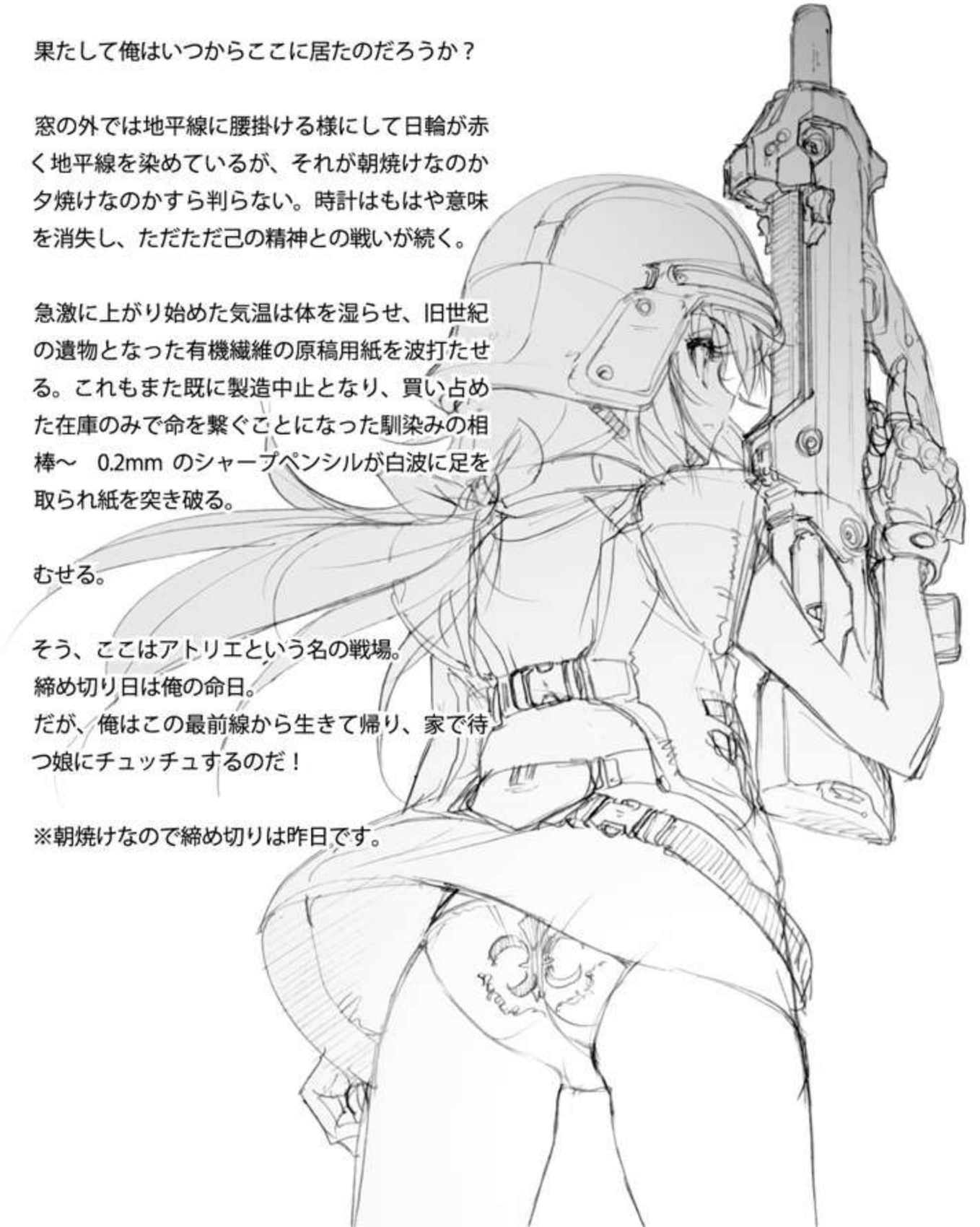
窓の外では地平線に腰掛ける様にして日輪が赤く地平線を染めているが、それが朝焼けなのか夕焼けなのかすら判らない。時計はもはや意味を消失し、ただただ己の精神との戦いが続く。

急激に上がり始めた気温は体を湿らせ、旧世紀の遺物となった有機繊維の原稿用紙を波打たせる。これもまた既に製造中止となり、買い占めた在庫のみで命を繋ぐことになった馴染みの相棒～　0.2mm のシャープペンシルが白波に足を取られ紙を突き破る。

むせる。

そう、ここはアトリエという名の戦場。
締め切り日は俺の命日。
だが、俺はこの最前線から生きて帰り、家で待つ娘にチュッチュするのだ！

※朝焼けなので締め切りは昨日です。



Chapter 1: Welcome in the Summer

It's August. Such hot weather must be unreal. From long ago, I've hated this country's summers. I've detested them.

I'm not this country's citizen to begin with. I'm here at first due to circumstances regarding my parents, then later due to circumstances regarding my native country.

Huang Lingyin is my name.

The exclusive pilot of the IS ShenLong and a representative cadet.

And now I'm a first-year student attending the IS Academy.

"So...hot..."

It's August, and the IS Academy enters the late summer vacation. Because of this, roughly half of the students that came from all throughout the world returned home. I also truly thought about returning to my country, but—

"....."

But, it's better to forget it.

Even if I return home, my parents won't be there together; and I don't want to receive the annoying training of the military. Besides, there is another reason why I don't want to return.

(That guy, he should still be here. Good grief; why should **I** invite **him**. He really is the same guy from before.)

Walking down the dormitory corridor (geez, why is there no air conditioner!), I gradually became angrier.

—Oh yeah, I'll just have to let that guy come invite me. Thinking that, I made a U-Turn — and at that moment, I unexpectedly ran into him.

"Oh, if it isn't Rin? What´s up?"

"I-I-Ichika!? W-Why are you here, weren't you in your room?"

"Ah, it's because I forgot to turn in my report... Hm? What are you holding?"

"N-Nothing!"

Reflexively, I hid the ticket that I was holding in my hand, behind my back.

.....Ah, not good!

"Hum, you noticed? Actually—"

Even though I could obviously go on like this! Even though I could've said it!

"......?"

Gu..... he's giving me a "what's she doing" face.....

Aah, ahem ahem!

"T-Today sure was hot."

"Hm? Is it? I feel like it's still cool."

"It's very hot. This country's summers have always been like this."

"Ah, so you´ve still got something against hot weather."

Uuuuhh...

He, remembering the past, made me a little happy.

—Ah, no no! He's forgotten the important promise!

"Well, whatever. If that's the case, then do you wanna come to my room? There's an AC."

Hm? Perhaps this is a chance.....?

"W-Well, is that so. Then let's go to your room. And give me a drink?"

"Yeah, yeah. Is barley tea[4A 1] OK?"

"If it's cold, then anything is fine."

As I said that, I walked side by side with Ichika.

It's quiet in the dorms now, giving a bit of a "Just the two of us in the world" feeling.

(Come to think of it, I don't smell of sweat, do I.....?)

Suddenly bothered by such a thing, I took half a step away from Ichika.

Don't worry. Don't worry..... Even though I was thinking that, because of this heat, I can't help but sweat a bit. —Yes, I can't help it!

"Rin, hey."

"!? W-What!?"

Without hesitation, Ichika brought his face near me. —Woah, too close, too close! I reflexively forced that face away.

".....Say, even though I called you a lot of times, you didn't respond!"

"H-Hmm? O-Oh! Sorry about that! I was thinking about something."

"Rin was thinking about something? Hmm."

"W-What....."

"Ah, nothing in particular. Well, it's that, if you can consult with someone, do it as much as possible. If you take it upon yourself alone, nothing good will become of it."

"H-Hum..... I know already....."

Ah, not good..... My heart's beating very fast. What, idiot. My height has alas grown over a long period of time, I've become an IS pilot, and moreover..... I'm improving my manners and whatnot.....

As I was thinking about those things, Ichika once again began to stare at my face like someone that has been silenced.

"Rin?"

"W-What is it!"

"What do you mean? We've arrived to my room. Let's go in."

"I-I know, stupid."

As I said this, I entered the room behind Ichika. I've been here many times before, and yet my heart was beating nonstop?

(Ah..... Uu..... What, still.....)

Shit. After entering the room and sitting on the bed, it immediately turned bad.

(Ichika.....smelled good.....)

And given that this is Ichika's room, naturally, that " good smell" feels even stronger.

Ahhh, not good, I'm not calming down.

(Aa..... Uu.....)

I wanted to wriggle my legs about, but I didn't want to be seen moving like that by Ichika, so in the end I shook my body restlessly.

After a while, I noticed a book that was placed on the table.

But rather than a book, it was a photo album.

"Ahh, you still keep commemorative photos?"

"Hm? I guess. But these last few years was because Chifuyu-nee wasn't at home. —Ah. This one we took of the three of us with you, Rin, was the last one. Do you

remember it? It was during the 2nd year of Middle School, just before you moved out."

"I do somehow or another."

—That's a lie.

It wasn't "somehow or another". I firmly remember it.

"But, I don't quite get it. Wasn't this something Chifuyu-san started? She would occasionally take photos . Even though it's quite splendid, I can't see her as the fixated type."

"Hm, well. Perhaps, photos that weren't just of the two of us were essential. She already said that we should properly remember those who were with us in the past. ––Here, it's tea. It has been cooled."

"Thanks."

As I drank the barley tea that I received, I casually checked my wallet from the surface of my uniform. ..... Hm, all right. It's still there.

"Can I see this?"

"Ah, OK. I just finished sorting it out."

I, while trying my best to pretend that, "I only paid attention to it because it was opened nearby," turn the pages of the album. Come to think of it, it was actually my first time seeing this.

The first page was indeed a photo of Ichika and Chifuyu-san. I wonder how old these pictures were. Chifuyu-nee was wearing her middle school uniform, and Ichika was much smaller than he is right now.

"That one was in the first year of elementary school."

"Heh? This one was the very first?"

"Hm, it seems so. I think that there were no photos before this one."

Looking at Ichika who seemed to not know the reason, I also thought about it. Why would Chifuyu-san, who loves her brother so much, have only the pictures of Ichika from the first grade on?

--Ah.

(Perhaps, in the pictures before this one, both of their parents were also photographed.....)

I don't know the details about Ichika's parents' disappearance. But I heard that when Ichika became aware of his surroundings, they weren't there anymore.

"Well, the things of the past are fine, I guess."

While saying that, Ichika turns to the next page.

(Ah, a shy face.)

As I thought, when even Ichika looks at the photos of when he was young, he would also get embarrassed, it would seem.

This kind of situation is kinda cute, so I naturally got a happy feeling.

(Recently, there hasn't been an event in which the two of us would be alone like this.)

--Ah.

(T-The two of us alone.....? Uh, crap.....crap..... My heart's started to beat fast.....)

When I noticed, it was too late. My face became flaring red, and the heat rose.

"Umm, is this in the second grade? If I remember correctly, this should be when I went grape picking during an excursion."

Suddenly.

Suddenly, Ichika sat next to me.

After my heart jumped with shock, an oddly loud sound was heard from the bed.

(Huh, ah, uh.....? U-Umm, there shouldn't be any sweat scent, right? I mean, the bed.....the meaning of sitting side by side on a bed is in other words, umm..... umm.....)

I awfully miss the me that heard the phrase 'keep your train of thought short' from an old song that one time, and immediately thought, 'Huh? How can it be like that. Isn't that foolish.' --What, can a train of thought simply

be made short like that? Isn't that low quality rubbish. The one who made this, show yourself.

"Rin."

"Fueey!?"

---Where did that voice come from, the one just now? Isn't that unattractive. The worst.....

"Do you want it?"

--.

Huh? Huh? Huh? What, what is it, what's the situation ? I want an explanation of the circumstances.

What was that, wait a moment. Huh? Ichika--huh?

(What's with the 'want'.....what's with this staggering straightforwardness.....)

I mean, he's making me answer; how sadistic he is. Does he want to bully the girl he likes? --Huh, likes? Likes? Ichika, likes me?

"You don't need it?"

"Huh, ah, well, ple--please wait a bit."

"Oh."

No way, what's with this development!? How'd this happen!?

Furthermore, my heart is pounding greatly, and seems like it could explode at any time.

My face has become hot to the extent that it already hurts, and suddenly, sweat came spurting out.

(Uuh! Not good, not good, not gooood, I say.....!)

I panicked at the smell of the sweat that I suddenly felt .

Uh..... As I thought, taking a shower before coming here would have been good.

(--But if I'm thinking like that.....it's like I was expecting something from the start. Something like, something like this..... Right?)

"You don't have to be so reserved."

Whaaaat!?

I sensed Ichika's voice even more closely than a moment ago, and my body hopped several centimeters.

Thump Thump

Thump Thump

My heart can't stop beating.

Unsatisfied, like a downpour.

"Ichi...ka....."

I timidly look at Ichika and, straight...he was merely looking straight at me.

Not good.

This will, draw.....me.....in.....

"So, what do you want to do?"

"I.....want....."

"Hm"

Ichika nodded, reached his hand towards me, and then --

"So I'll pour you another cup."

"--Huh?"

What did he say?

"Another.....cup.....?"

"What I said, the barley tea."

"Barley tea....."

"Rin, you said that you wanted it."

"I said that I wanted it....."

After a few seconds of me parroting him, I thought my heart would stop from Ichika's words.

"Hm? Ah, could it be that you misunderstood it for something else--"

"Hm, wha!? What, could possibly-- Y-Y-You idiooooooot!!"

Smack

A dry sound of a slap magnificently reverberates.

"That huurts....."

"Hum!!"

Up to ten minutes had passed after that, yet Ichika was still rubbing the cheek that I had slapped.

Somehow, it seems that it was pain befitting of the situation. Ichika's mouth is deformed in pain like the shock still remains.

(You deserved it, idiot!)

Saying such a thing, letting people misunderstand..... of course there would be a consequence!

(Yeah, that--)

That.....

"....."

If, like that, I had been kissed.....

(No, no, no! NO! That kind of thing won't happen! Because that Ichika, "that" Ichika, that guy's dead brain surely won't change until he dies.)

After thinking this, the me who misunderstood was embarrassed to death.

My own cheeks were different than the warm feeling before, becoming pain.

(Wuuu.....should I give him another...)

Having thought this on impulse, I glanced at Ichika.

"....."

Even though it was a misunderstanding, the throbbing in my chest wasn't fake. For this reason, this kind of misunderstanding without any harm causes even more anger.

(Although we've been friends all these years, this guy's thickheadness is still surprising...)

Also, it was the same when we reunited.

When I had just become a representative contender student, I heard in the news that there was a guy that was able to pilot IS. I was more shaken by Ichika, whom I hadn't see for a year, even if it was only on the screen.

After that, because of my age and my past time spent living in Japan, I got accepted at IS academy. Once that happened, I returned to this country.

In short, I was very happy when I reunited with Ichika , but at the same time, I was very anxious.

In the past, when I said: "You'll have to eat my cooking every day", the meaning of that was, like, having the intention of getting married.

In middle school the opportunity wasn't very good, so I wasn't able show a high level of cooking abilities, but if there was another meeting right now---

(Actually, he was thinking like that...)

In the end, he interpreted it like "Feeding me for free, Rin is really a good person"...again fooling me completely, really. Haa...

My stiffened shoulders start to feel the exhaustion, so I force myself to relax my mood.

(Anyways! The me today is different from usual! Hm!)

I searched in my wallet, and held the two tickets. Calm down, calm down.....No worries, I've practiced so much, it should be alright.

"Ichika."

"Hmm?"

"You, are you going anywhere during the summer vacation?" **(¡)**

"Hmm...Now that you mention it, I think I would like to go somewhere."

.....not bad, not bad, everything is going as expected.

"That's too bad, so let me give you a convenient solution."

"Convenient solutions coming from Rin... in the end, it's gonna cost."

Again, it's about costs...I restrained myself before I said it. If it has always cost money but now it's free, there would definitively be a misunderstanding. By the way, that.....the fact that I love Ichika might also get exposed.

"Of course! Say, who would even think that amusement parks don't cost money? How dumb are you, really!"

In the end, again, I recovered with the previous voice tone. I just thought that in the past I always collected money from Ichika like this. After all, in the very beginning my opportunity was when Ichika came to my family's Chinese restaurant to eat dinner.

At that time I was really happy, and thought about letting him come for free. In the end he said: "No, no, it cannot be free, don't we say that there aren't free meals on earth? And after all, uncle's cooking is too good. That's why, let me pay." After that, I accepted his meals' fees.

My family's cooking is good for sure, and even I've always known, being said by someone else...hm, I was very happy.

(But that day my real thoughts were instantly known by my parents.....huuuu...)

- - - - -.

Every time I remember the moments with my parents, my heart hurts badly. This is also the reason why I can't return to my mother country.

(Don't think about these things right now...)

For now it's better to forget the pain in my heart. Or else that wood-headed Ichika, who is abnormally sensitive to the bad mood of others, will immediately sense it.

"Hum."

"That is?"

Ichika is constantly looking at the tickets I took out...he took the bait.

"You don't know, do you? It's the newly built 'water world'. Oh, let me say that first, tickets for this month are already gone. To buy a ticket for a day without being lined up for two hours is impossible."

"Is that so?"

Anger. He really is insensitive. He doesn't know how much effort I put into buying these.

"So, when will we go?"

"G-go?"

"? Isn't it because of that you came here?"

"You're right."

Waah, success! The most difficult thing was how to invite him, to make it so simply. ---Oh, calm down, calm down, even though the victory is in my reach I need to control myself, didn't I learn this in my training.

"Well, after all, only I would invite you, so be thankful for my good heart."

I said this while knocking Ichika's face with the tickets.

(Even though it's like this, my heart is beating as if it will break.)

"How much does it cost?"

"2500 yen." [4A 2]

"...not expensive?"

"If you don't want it, it doesn't matter. After all, if Ichika doesn't want it, there are others who would."

Though there could be others who would buy it, to be honest I don't want to sell it to anybody if it isn't Ichika. Because it was for the sake of inviting Ichika that I prepared them, so it is obvious that I wouldn't do that.

"Well, OK. I'll buy it. When's the date."

"This Saturday."

"It's really sudden."

To Ichika, it's a very common reply.

(It can't be helped; it is because my friends don't want them so I got them.)

"Well, I don't have any problems, what about Rin?"

"Ah, me too!"

Ah, I messed up again...this response without afterthoughts is obviously indecisive. My inner thoughts have been beautifully exposed.

"Where do we meet? If it's inside the academy we can only wear uniforms, so wouldn't it be better outside?"

"Hm, hm! Yes! Let's meet at the park gates to make the most of the opportunity!"

---Success! It really, really has the impression of a date!

(By the way, this is a date!) In my heart I quietly clenched my right fist. Recently, because of the increasing opponents, I've been pushed aside, but this time it is me who is ahead.

"When will we meet up? It should be in the morning."

"You're right, so how about 10 o'clock?"

"OK."

Great! Great! In my heart I don't stop making the winning pose. I drank in one gulp the barley tea that has just been brought to me, put the cup on the table with a * Dang*, then stood up. —Huu, it's decided.

"Why are you acting so strange?"

"That's very rude! Anyway, don't be late tomorrow!"

I closed the door with a *Dang*, then immediately went to the corridor. After I got out from there I did an arm-stretching pose, not in my heart but in reality.

(SUCCESS!!!!!!!!! Success! Success!)[4A 3]

Since I couldn't make any sound, this joy has already enlivened my body.

(I need to hurry to my room to prepare myself!)

I returned to my own room in large steps. The hot temperature of summer, when I noticed that everything has already gone alright. Usually, the walk to my room feels long, but it felt shorter today. I'm sure that wings grew on both of my legs, without a doubt.

In the passage my shoulders may have touched a few students, ------hmm, it should be an illusion.

"I~have~returned!"

With a *Pa*, I opened the door as if I wanted to blow up it up, and my roommate lying on the bed widely opened her eyes. The fry sticking out of her mouth made a clear sound after a half-beat pause.

"You, you have returned."

My golden haired and jade-colored eye roommate, Tina Hamilton, blinked mysteriously, holding a magazine in her hands while gazing foolishly at me. [4A 4]

"Fu, Fuu, fufufu....."

"Wha-? Hey, Rin? Did you short circuit because of the heat?

"Yeah."

Ah, really, everything between Tina and I goes well. I couldn't hide my joy and submerged myself on the bed, holding tightly my blankets...

"...Wh-what's that? Do you want to strangle your blankets?"

"Yeah~"

"Rin, are you seriously answering?"

"Yeah~"

Yeah, is it, huuhuu~~

Showing an unbearable altitude, Tina's sight returned to her magazines. After that she tended her arm to reach the French fries which she was about to eat.

Well, after all everything goes well! Ahahaha...

Not good, I can't be like that forever. If I don't prepare for tomorrow right now.....

(Swimming suit, OK, the clothes are all newly bought, after that is...)

---there's also things like underwear.

(.....)

Wait, hmm, don't we say that a very high impression of pressure would influence the people's heart, so if something happens, is it, is it? Yeah, this is for a preparation just in case. Preparation! Didn't the ancestors say that you can be in peace if you have prepared everything, that's right, the one who said that sentence is really mighty.

"Tina, very mighty, isn't it?"

"Yes yes, yeah."

Pa! The sound of a fry being bitten resounded. Tina, really, from the beginning she was the one talking about gaining weight, there's really nothing to do about her.

(And I don't have that issue!)

I already knew my free time last month during the sea school, so I started adjusting my consumption of snacks since June.

And the efforts I have made has a result, now I have a slender body. Yeah, there won't be a problem for when my body will be seen---

(But, there will maybe be the time when my body gets looked at.)

Not being covered by a swimsuit but the body directly.

.....

"That, Tina."

"Wh-what?"

"Summer is really hot, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Pa! The sound of a fry being separated resounds again.

"Fuuu. It's finally finished."

I, Yamada Maya, am sitting in the indoor training room tasting hot tea. In that hot weather, drinking hot tea with the AC in the room running, it is sumptuous as expected.

In this academy's funds there is a part in which you need to pay taxes, so there's a bit of guilt in my chest.

(But for now I'll allow myself. Finally.....finally I finished a term of work.)

Though there are too many incidents this year.

With the 'male IS pilot' as center, abnormal numbers of personal machine pilots, frequent incidents, and the IS committee ordering the transfer of Orimura Ichika...

My head hurts each time I think about that.

Finally I finished a little more than a half of work, so I think I can rest a little bit.

(But, it's very difficult)

I looked at the two documents again and again, and then sighed. The document is about two students, but the problem is the names on them.

Orimura Ichika, Shinonono Houki.

These two---they are clearly not representatives, but they still have their personal machines, and it's the source of the problem. Orimura-kun is relatively OK, but Shinonono's IS doesn't have the national ownership rights---which is also the nationality register.

To say it in another form, every other country is recruiting its own exclusive pilots, so the IS became the other countries' accessories. Every country would even take an IS by stretching an arm from the mouth. Even if it's only one, it would greatly affect the country's military force.

Moreover, it is still the IS inventor, Shinonono Tabane, who uses the fourth generation skills by herself, so there are plenty of countries fantasizing about her. [4A 5]

"Haa....."

Why are these issues concentrating in my class.

Especially the transfer students are weird. Normally, a class wouldn't have that many personal machine users.

(---there should be some thinking done)

Even if it doesn't belong to any country's organization, but wanting to block the countries' attention is very difficult.

(Well, I shouldn't think too deep in this topic.)

After all, these thoughts won't change anything.

(Later, I'll finish all the work that is still remaining at once.)

After I drank the tea, I took a rest and dug in the files stacked in the form of a mountain. Then, I took one document from the files. *Shlaa*---

(*Shlaa*.....?)

It was a document.

A document became two, no; it seems that in the beginning it was two stacked together, and then the bottom one came off.

"It scared me. But this document is..."

In a second, my mind froze.

"That, that is....."

It was to keep such things from happening that I looked over all the files, or so I intended. Does it mean that I didn't see its circumstances and its priorities, and I only took care of the other files?

"Shit.....this is a very bad situation."

In a classroom with the AC running, I panicked to the point that I had cold sweat. And that sweat is very cold... with the both meanings.

"Finally arrived."

In front of the IS academy door, I just got off from the white Roseloss , and a disturbing hot air came to me, but I'm still in high spirits.

(As expected, it's because I'm under the same sky as the people I missed.)

I, Cecilia Alcott finished the work in the United Kingdom, and finally returned to Japan.

Alcott family's job, representative contender student report, re-adjustment of my personal machine, participation at the violin competition, reunion with my old friends, and finally, paying respect to both of my parents' grave.

"....."

Every time I think about this, my chest faintly hurts.

---Why didn't they say anything before leaving.

---Why did they leave me alone.

---Why, at the end, these two were together.

(One day I'll understand too.)

"Milady!"

!!

After being called I turned my body around to face my personal maid and childhood friend Chelsea (?) who showed her usual smile.

"What is happening to you?"

"No, nothing."

Even if I'm somewhat in disarray, I forcefully tried to look calm. Chelsea's sight for a person's change of heart is still keen. She's always been like that, and her body shares a feeling that doesn't match the coolness of other 18 years old, and though I said she's my childhood friend , she's more like a big sister or something like that. That Chelsea is the one I yearn for, and also the goal for my efforts.

(After that, I want to---)

"Now, do you want to go see Orimura-sama right now ?

"Chelsea! Didn't you go transport the suitcases?"

"Actually, there's something I need to confirm, so even though I'm a bit shy I returned just in case."

"It, is that right, so what do you need to confirm?"

"Is that white fabric underwear for Orimura-sama's personal use?"

"....."

"Milady, if it's too fancy, it might have a reverse effect."

"That, that is..."

"So, I'll go first."

Without giving her time to find an excuse, Chelsea politely curtsied. [4A 6]

No it's not, it is, it is---huh?

"Wha?"

That thing which I secretly bought online was hidden in a double pocket in the suitcase. How can it be?

Chelsea's gentle smile, suddenly burst in my mind. A sudden wave of embarrassment came from me.

Ahahahaha.....

(The so-called 'there's a needle so it can penetrate' is like that.)

My cheeks start to burn, and sweat without any connection to the summer starts to spew. And especially the palm of my hands, which I need to wash immediately .

"Hmm? Cecilia?"

Huh---

Wha? Wha? WHAT-?

(This voice belongs to Ichika-san? Why would he be here? Does it mean that he came here to welcome me?)

My hand holding my chest beating unstoppably, I turned to him as if it's nothing.

"Oh!"

"Ichika-san, I haven't seen you for a week."

I greeted him by twisting a part of my dress, but my heart couldn't calm down.

---Ah, it's really Ichika-san! He was really thinking about me so he came here to welcome me.....ah, Ichika-san, really!

"When I thought that Cecilia was going to return, I couldn't sit properly."

"Really, Ichika-san.....you really sweet talk."

"I'm serious. The week in which Cecilia wasn't there, it seemed that the time was running in a infinite cycle."

"Ichika-san..... Ah."

"We won't be separated again, 'my princess'."

Aha, aha, no, you can't, in this place! Someone might see us.

"Cecilia?"

"What?!"

Summer daydream---no, it was a vain thought.

"Are you OK? You were dazed. Is it because you got a heat stroke? You need to be very careful, having a heat stroke in the summer is very dangerous."

"No. No problem! Sitting in the car, I felt only a bit dizzy!"

"If that's all, then okay."

"Hm hm, it's like that."

!?

"Hm? And she would be?"

"This is the first time we meet. I am the maid serving Cecilia-sama, Chelsea Blackett. I'll be in your care."

Chelsea, who after taking care the luggage returned I-don't-know-when, was introducing herself to Ichika-san.

(Ara, why is Chelsea alone?)

After thinking carefully, I immediately understood. Seeing Chelsea come alone, she was probably hiding herself to peek somewhere, and appear at the right moment.

She's really good at reading people's feelings**!**

"Ah, the one Cecilia mentioned before, it was you. First time we've met. My name is Orimura Ichika."

"Yes, Orimura-sama, please allow the presumptuous me to ask, what has milady said about me?"

"Hmm....., a very understanding, outstanding, tender beautiful woman."

"Ah—"

She warmly smiled. That kind of polite speech is very beautiful, and at the same time has a warm feeling without any harm wrapping the person.

This kind of thing is undoubtedly clear to me.

(Ichika-san really, he hasn't said that I am a beautiful woman.)

Chelsea seemed to have looked through my jealous thoughts.

(Wuwu....., Chelsea is Chelsea.)

I can't win against that smile. It's always been like that.

"I've also heard things concerning Ichika-sama from Cecilia-sama."

-- - - - -!?

"Huh, is that right. May I ask you what has she said about me?"

Aaaaaaaaah, please Chelsea, don't get into details!

"Uhuh, actually....."

This time after feeling that Cecilia shook, Chelsea made the smile which she makes when she wants to make fun of someone. After slightly putting her finger in front of her mouth---

"That's a woman's secret."

That smile was, even towards girls, fascinating.

"Ah~, Chelsea-san really is the beautiful woman whom Cecilia has talked about."

"......Yeah"

The scene moved to the café near the school canteen.

This shop has a good AC temperature, business all year, and even the drinks would eclipse the café in front of the station. Also, you can taste the four seasons' clothing, so during the summer vacations, the students were obviously flooding the place.

"Hey, isn't that the first-year Orimura-kun??"

"It's true! It's the first time I've seen him in person."

"Ayaa. He is really cute; I didn't think that the younger ones were bad either."

"But to me he has the first-year working hard attitude which makes people love him."

These kind of ridiculous comments were boiling around. Normally, everyone would fight to be in a

picture with Ichika, and be happier and prouder than anyone. And now.....

Cecilia is putting on a bad face, and boringly stirring her ice cream. The ice cube that has been in contact with the straw made a transparent crispy sound, and all that was non-important background noise to her ears.

(How can they be chatting so cheerfully when it's the first time that they meet each other.....)

Thinking about the conversation that Ichika and Chelsea had, she again became irritated.

"Chelsea-san is great. And we can't see that you're in your teens."

"Orimura-sama, please call me Chelsea, and the way you speak to me, please consider me as a simple maid."

"No, how can I? To add –san to someone who's older is basic respect. Furthermore, even though it's not needed, to not add honorific suffixes is difficult. I would be nervous."

"Well, Orimura-sama can really speak. It seems that you really know how to please a woman."

"What? It's the first time that someone's said that to me ."

"So it's like this, huhu..."

On one side, Ichika, who was a bit shy but joyful, and at the same time wouldn't expose that kind of behavior in front of herself, and on the other side Chelsea, who clearly knows her thoughts but is still getting close to Ichika, were making Cecilia even more disturbed.

(That rumor, is it true.....)

At the end of the last month, she heard a rumor by chance. Until yesterday, it had not bothered her too much, but with things as they were now, she couldn't remain calm.

The rumor was --- 'Orimura Ichika likes older women'.

(I originally thought that it was a baseless rumor.....)

But after seeing his attitude towards Chelsea, Cecilia started to wonder if it could be something more than just a 'rumor'.

(Becoming an older woman, that's impossible) (!)

Since the two of them were born in the same year, even if she gets older, the other one couldn't get younger. Making an effort to achieve this is like trying to climb to reach the sky.

Cecilia's mood oddly went down, feeling even worse.

"Ha..."

"Hey, Cecilia, why are you so down?.....Is it because of me?"

"Indeed."

"Hey, that was fast!"

Looking at the dejected Ichika who seems to have taken a great blow, Cecilia's mood didn't get better. Even though he invited me to this café, I'm not that happy anymore.

(It's all Ichika san's fault.)

For the time being, pushing all this fury towards Ichika, Cecilia puts the straw in her mouth, and the usually tasty sugary milk pot now has also lost its taste.

And because removing the straw from the side of her mouth would only make her sigh, Cecilia could only helplessly continue drinking.

"....."

"....."

Ten minutes later, or twenty was it, or just an instant. Anyway, after a silent moment, Ichika opened his mouth to talk.

"Cecilia."

"What is it?"

"Do you want to try coming to that place?"

"---Huh?"

"Hn~~, today's weather is awesome! How bright is the sun!"

It's the so-called great weather for a date. Rin tightly held her fist, and used all of her strength to make an

encouragement pose. Though the background was still her own room, but with the clothes all prepared, specially all new bought for today.

(Hu, hu, hu, finally I took a step before that Houki and Charlotte, this is my entire victory!)

To Rin, winning against these cohabiting girls is a great thing, before transferring she couldn't help being frustrated when she heard that Ichika was living with girls.

(Humph, even though I was wearing a swimsuit, but this time is different from the seaside school, to say it in the most basic way. This is a real date! It's the so-called boy-girl intercourse.)

Boy-girl, after pondering this term, Rin's head was suddenly dyed of a peach color.

(Hm, today I chose the cutest underwear between all of them as backup, hm.)

Wasn't it sung in the old times: We don't know what'll happen in summer so we can't be careless.

(For example, the returning road or something like that.)

.....

"It was very fun today."

"Hm. Because I was with Rin."

"Yeah, yeah, you can finally appreciate my thoughts. Good, good."

"......Rin."

"Wha? What is it? Why are you suddenly holding my hand?"

"I, have finally understood, to be separated from Rin and to be reunited again, how much is that important."

"I-Ichika."

"Rin, I love you."

"Huh, ah—no, not here."

"Do you hate me?"

"I don't really hate you....."

"So, it's OK."

"Idiot, to be so much of a fool..."

--It was a joke, A JOKE!

"Haha, isn't that right, Tina?"

"Yes, yes, you're right."

Tina, who buried her head while eating ramen, casually agreed with her. When she's serious, it also means that she looks stupid. After Rin's scandal from yesterday, the reason behind it, which is the same for today's excitement, became clear..... the reason for this could only be....

"Then, I'm off."

"Be careful on the road."

"Maybe I'll be late tonight!"

"Hm, is that right?"

"Then goodbye."

"Goodbye."

After the door closed behind her with a *Dang*, Rin made her encouraging pose again with her fist closed, and strode out of there.

"Hn?"

"Ara?"

In front of the Waterworld's gate, Rin stumbled upon a familiar face. Rin and Cecilia looked at each other, and in a strange atmosphere, the two of them greeted each other stiffly.

"It's really a coincidence to see you here, Rin-san."

"Hn, hn, hello, Cecilia."

Why is she here, is what both were thinking, while waiting for someone to arrive.

Both were astonished by the clothes the other had chosen to wear.

(Is Cecilia's friend coming too? Never mind, I'm only waiting for Ichika.)

Huhu..... Rin couldn't suppress her laugh, as she was waiting for Ichika's arrival with a dumb look on her face.

.....

.....

.....

(Aaah, he's late! What's he doing)

"What's going on?"

Cecilia mumbled as Rin was stomping with her feet. Her eyes were constantly checking the hour, making it seem as if the one she was waiting for was also late.

Rin still had Cecilia on her mind, but what concerned her the most was what Ichika was doing. It had already been more than 10 minutes since the appointed time, getting close to 20 minutes.

(That guy, since the time we met for the first time, has always been late when it matters the most)

Her phone then rang, and as she irritably took out her cellphone, she inmediately recognized the number highlighted on the screen. It was Ichika's.

"Hello? What the heck are you doing? Where are you now?"

"At school."

"Huh!?"

"Ah! Let me explain; Yesterday, I heard from Yamada-sensei that today the Institute's researchers would come to begin a research on Byakushiki. And now , they are saying that they couldn't get the data on the Second Shift, as it took place so suddenly last month. They want to take the data again."

"......What did you say?"

"Well, that..... sorry, apparently I won't be able to come today."

"WH-!?"

In a second, Rin, who had just gone past her limit, got so angry that her face went white, all while Ichika's voice continued to reach her ears.

"It's not so simple; in fact, yesterday I tried to contact you, but you wouldn't answer your phone. I even went to your room, but someone said you were already asleep. You were, right?"

"....."

As a matter of fact, in order to be ready for today's date, Rin had decided to go to sleep at 8:00 pm that night, and in order to avoid any potential bother, she specially turned off her cellphone. Finally, she instructed Tina to not wake her up unless it was a great emergency.

(Aaah, stuuupiiiid! Wouldn't that be considered a great emergency!?)

"And that's the situation."

"Right."

She couldn't help but to answer discouragingly.

"____"

"I gave the ticket to Cecilia, so you two should play to your hearts content."

----------Huh?

"Huh? Cecili...wha? Wait a moment, what do you mean with that?"

"Huh? Cecilia isn't there? I have already said to her that we should meet each other at the front door."

"----------"

Th-that, that, that.....

"Can I kill this guy?"[4A 7]

"Why are you saying something that dangerous. Rin, you're fine, aren't you?"

Because of the carefree attitude from Ichika, Rin's ' trembling status' finally became unbearable.

"It isn't something like 'fine', what you did to me, you."

"Wah, don't get angry all of sudden. ------Ah, yes. That, do I need to go right now?"

On the other end of the phone, seems there is someone talking with Ichika, and the conversation between Rin and him was temporally interrupted by it.

"Sorry Rin, I need leave for now, sorry for bothering you. Also, apologize to Cecilia in my stead."

Kacha

The phone was hung up emotionlessly, with only the beeping sound remaining.

"Gh, Gh, Gh--"

Rin tightly held her mobile phone, emitting a *kk* friction sound, and had Cecilia engaged the conversation a second later, the cell phone would have, without a doubt, fallen on the ground, immolated.

"Hey, Rin-san? What happened?"

"Heh, Cecilia.....listen to me.....Ichika won't come."

"....."

After hearing this sentence, Cecilia froze. Rin repeated it to Cecilia who didn't understand what the other person had just said.

"Ichika won't come."

"Huh? That.....why? By the way, why is Rin-san....."

"Today you will date me."

"Wha.....WHAAAT? I have been invited here by Ichika ..."

"Didn't I just say it? That ticket was prepared by me! Do you understand?"

Pata! *Pata!* After blinking two times, Cecilia finally, slowly said--------

".....Rin-san."

"What."

"Let's first enter and drink something. I don't understand the situation, and also-"

With blue veins on the surface of her face, Cecilia was slightly smiling.

"-and also please explain entirely what happened."

In front of the Waterworld's door, there was a naturally formed Shura's land encircling the two of them, disturbed by something else than the hot weather.

"You're saying that Ichika-san wanted someone to replace him, so he said words like 'Don't you want to try to go there'?"

"Right."

"Ha.....I had a feeling that something wasn't right. From the beginning I thought that there was something weird."

"Liar. That outfit, didn't you prepare it wholeheartedly ?"

"Wh-?! It's, this.....is only an etiquette, yes, only an etiquette."

"Ah, I know, I know."

While making deaf ears to Cecilia's words, Rin let fly a paperplane she made with a napkin. And being so soft, it didn't fly much before it fell to the ground.

Right, just like the Rin right now.

"Hu....."

"Ha....."

In Waterworld's coffee shop, the heavy sighs from the two of them resounded at the same time.

"Then."

"Then what?"

"Should we go home?"

"You're right. I'm not in the mood for swimming now."

As the two of them decided to get up, the broadcast resounded inside.

"Ehem, next is today's main event! The steeplechase[4A8] pair race begins at one o'clock in the evening, and every participant is requested to go to the square at noon ~"

The two of them, who didn't have any interest to begin with, rose their ears to the contents in the back.

"The winning prize is a two tickets pack, for a six-days trip with all-expenses paid."

(That's it!)

(It's that.)

The Okinawa trip as prize. If what happened today was used as a reason, Ichika would be unable to refuse, and so, it's decided.....

"Cecilia."

"Rin-san."

""WE OUGHT TO WIN THIS!""

The two of them hit each other's wrist, and just like that, the strongest pair in history was born.

"OK! The first Waterworld pair steeplechase in water starts now!!"

As the host onee-san announced with a loud voice,she performed a flying leap. Like that, she was wearing a boldly opened bikini with her vivid, voluminous chest. She may have done this to get the interest and attention from the audience right from the beginning. The public (mostly males) started cheering and clapping their hands, screaming 'Waaaahhhh'.

Also, because all the participants were female, the audience was in high spirits

A few troublemaking men trying to sneak into the event were told expressionlessly by the reception staff to 'Try to understand', and they couldn't help but to retreat.

Though it's a women-oriented society, this is different. As expected, the competitions on water are still non-female. The jury here is made by the owner of the facility, and the Koichiro Island's sponsor, though it's more for his personal interest.

"Everyone in the audience, please kindly applaud our contestants!"

In a storm-like applause sound, the participants waved towards the audience in their sight of view.

At that moment, there was a completely indifferent team. --------Rin and Cecilia. These two were both stretching their bodies, warming up for this contest.

"He, shu! By the way, Cecilia, your swimsuit is different than the one from before."

"Huh, ah. How can I put it, yes, it's because of emotional matters."

"Liar. After all, you were thinking of showing this new swimsuit to Ichika, didn't you! Aaah, that is why you bought something with that flowery pattern."

"No-noisy. Rin-san you too, how come your body is even more slender than when we were at the sea-side school."

"It was because of that! It's because I wanted to have a vigorous life that I worked extremely hard."

"I know, I know. It's really difficult to obtain it for Rin-san who is interested in night life."

Even though the two of them were comrades, they were using weird ways to encourage each other. Like that, the two of them were still seriously doing their warm-up, since they knew very well the stake of this competition.

"The prize is six days travel to the southern paradise of ----------Okinawa. Do your best, everyone."

Right, this time the prize is the target. The two of them were having their own delusions, and couldn't help but laugh stupidly.

Suddenly their eyes met.

"Ehe."

"Aha!"

(I must find a way to take it out from Cecilia.)

(I would trade anything to Rin-san for it.)

Under their smiling mask, they were glaring at each other, preparing a plan and finishing their warm-up.

"So I'll repeat the rules! Everyone, please look at this huge 50m x 50m pool. The first team arriving at the middle and capturing the flag is the winner! Also, as you see, the path is a circle taking the form of the central island. The obstacles set in the path basically all need two people to get beyond them. It needs the two people cooperating together, it is a test for friendship between two people from the same gender."

While Rin and Cecilia were listening to the announcer's explanation, they look down again to the path below. The central island was floating in the air, which makes it troublesome. .....No, it's only because of the rope pulling it that it was floating, but that isn't the issue here.

(Hm~~It seems that it's impossible to swim through. Is there a shortcut------)

(It seems that it's impossible to take the shortest path. So it means that you must do it over again if you fall into the water.)

So it was like this, it's really well made. The two of them understood the situation in front of their eyes. However, they thought of the same.

((Of course the majority of the participants are relatively normal people------))

The two of them are both personal IS users, and representative candidates of their respective countries, and their strength is equal to that of an army from the old days, and added that, is the accumulated training they've had so that they could skillfully operate an IS. If they participated in a simple competition of pure fighting ability, even normal men could hardly win against them. Even if they were against military units, they would certainly be evenly matched. And the so-called IS are the same, their pilots naturally have some great talent.

"Then next! The competition finally starts! Everybody ready, set------"

Bang! The gun signal clearly resounds, and the 24 contestants, for a total of 12 pairs of 'fairies', wearing swimsuits, charged at the same time.

"Cecilia!"

"I know!"

Right after the start of the competition, the two of them dodged the kicks from the pair besides them and took the lead for landing on the island. In this competition, every interference is OK. However, to the representative cadets who have received a formal military training, it's no use.

"Let's go."

"Oooh!!"

They swiftly dodged a pair of participants' attacks, and at the same time the opponent's foot was in the air and then fell in the water. Thus the participants were completely separated into two categories; the conservative category 'charge forwards' and the radical ' hurt the others first' category.

However, there was a problem this time.

No matter what, this young pair were acting very active right from the beginning, and took all the public's attention. And because of this, Rin and Cecilia had become everyone's target.

"Aaaahh, it's really troublesome."

"It's blocking me!"

Though the pairs charging at them were constantly ' falling' into water, they were endlessly charging back. It looked like the radical and the conservative ones came to an understanding, so even though the attacked ones can be resurrected right away, they'll obstruct them with all their strength.

"Wuu...If this continues, we'll be taken down."

Rin, who became anxious of the first pair which already reached the second island, winked towards Cecilia.

"Though it's a bit early, we should use our secret weapon."

"Ha....., what happens won't be my fault."

"This is for victory!"

"Right, if it's for victory..."

After the two of them finished talking through private channels, Rin and Cecilia faced the enemy again.

""WOOOOAAAAAHHHH""

Changing the back of their hands to fiercely protect themselves from the other pair's elbow, the two of them ignored them. After they sighed, Cecilia and Rin flashed towards them with a movement that could cut the wind.

Blam! The obstructing group fell in the water each after another, though they were already used to it.

"No matter how many times, we'll come back again."

The two participants emerged from the water, though the thing that should be on their body is gone.

"Huhu, you cannot abandon your swimsuit and live on....."

"As Mary Theresa said, if you wanna fight naked, then bring it on."

""Aaaaaaahhhh""

Rin and Cecilia, who had quickly snatched the swimsuit upper part, looked briefly at the obstructing group, and threw the piece of cloth in their hands to the opposite side, right into the audience's hands.

As expected-----no, exceeding the expected result, in face of such a turn of events, the male audience members began a ruckus.

"It's good, now the hindrances are gone."

"Let's quickly catch up."

On the highest island, there should be someone who pulls the rope, while the other one should pass through to the other side with the rope supporting her.

"Well, we must make up for the wasted time together."

"Hn, we can't fall behind any further."

Rin flew swiftly to the unstable little island swinging left and right, followed by Cecilia who looked through its timing. Just before, the public was storming and boiling because of the swimsuits, but now, it's because of these two's dynamism that the crowd is bursting with cheers.

"That's, that's impressive for two high schoolers, did they receive some kind of training?"

After that, for the second island, the two of them broke away from the obstacles and charged towards it. This time it was one who stopped the water flow while the other one used this opportunity to get through the obstacle, though both of them charged together.

"Haha! It's so relaxing!"

"Compared to a minefield, it's way too easy."

And just like this, they continued through the third and the fourth island, and when they finally arrived at the fifth---an issue emerged.

"Let's end this here."

Maybe because they thought that if they continue on running seriously, they'll lose, the leading team turned towards Rin and Cecilia.

"Ahaha. How can normal people beat us, the representative cadets."

"Wait, in front of us is the Kazaki-Kishimoto team! They seem to want to bring the contest in their fighting expert field."

"Huh? Expert.....what?"

"From what I know, these two are Wrestling and Judo gold-medalists at the Olympics. Though I heard that their relationship is very good, it means that they aren't in the same discipline but they are in good terms with each other."

"Huh...? What? Gold medalist? Does that mean that their body constitution is above average?"

The muscled girls pair who greatly match each other let out a roar and charged towards Rin's and Cecilia's side.

(This isn't good! We already used all our strength to run, so we're exhausted now, and if we fight these muscled girls---)

(It would be too much no matter what.)

Since they were so exhausted that they couldn't sense that the situation was getting tougher, they couldn't let themselves stop running. It's going to be bad.

"Sucesss!!!"

"Geh!"

Rin and Cecilia jumped backwards to distance themselves from them, but since it was a floating island, there wasn't any route for retreat.

"If it's like this.....Cecilia!"

"What?"

"I have a countermeasure for that! Charge!"

"Wha!? Do you want me to be the herald?"

"Yes! There's no time to hesitate."

"Aaah I don't care anymore."

Cecilia single-handly faced the charging medalist pair.

"Cecilia, turn here."

"Wha?"

Being called by a loud voice, Cecilia turned her head by reflex, and ended up seeing Rin's----foot palm.

"Huh? Ugh!!"

Entirely, perfectly.

Her own face has been entirely and perfectly trampled on.

"Great!"

Stepping on Cecilia as a board, Rin swiftly flies towards the terminal point, taking the flag.

"Victory!!"

After that, the little island where Rin was seconds ago and Cecilia with the other medalist pair, who lost balance , fell together into the few meters deep water.

Ping!!

The highly splashing water column was especially shining in Rin's eyes

"Thank you, Cecilia, you were indispensable."

And at that point, Cecilia's smiling face seemed to emerge from the sky. .....her expression was the same as if she was looking at her past comrade.

"He, he, he....."

From beneath the ground a sheer laugh came. Immediately after that a two times greater water column rose up.

"I cannot forgive you today! My face, by a foot, ------ Rin-san!"

Dressed with her swimsuit, Cecilia summoned Blue-Tears and full of anger, charged towards Rin.

"Huh, do you really wanna do it? ------Shenlong!"

Rin swiftly summoned Shenlong, posing as if to to express that she accepts the challenge.

"What? Are these two people students from the IS Academy? I didn't know that there would be two IS machines in this competition. Huh, but what do the rules state....."

The big sister host, crossed by confusion and excitement at the same time, starts to rattle on, her body and her arms waving wildly, and her voluminous chest bouncing out again.

"Aaaaaahhhhh!!"

"Yyyyyyyyyaaaaaaa!!!!!"

DONG!!!!!!!

The crossing of their blades made fire sparkles.

"Tears!!"

"It's too much to be true!"

Facing Cecilia's bullets coming straight at her, Rin used the boosters from her legs to maintain distance. When the enemy came closer, she increased the distance between them, and when she retreated, Rin caught up to her.

"Geh!! Is it the anti-sniper brake? It's as powerful as always."

Cecilia couldn't lock her target up precisely and could only repetitively move her muzzle. However, Rin didn't let go of this opportunity.

"My Impact Cannon is way quicker than you! Take this ! and this!"

Immediately after three consecutive attacks, Rin closed up the distance. However, it was all within Cecilia's calculations, and the sword that was about to cut her stopped.

"If only I could lock your movements, then I would get the edge."

After saying that, she aimed at Rin's back and shot twice.

"At this distance, my Impact Cannon is even quicker!"

Both of them let out all their weapons' powers respectively at a fingertip of each other, and none of them wanted to retreat, then----------

"Ah."

"Huh?"

"Uuu....."

Bang.....!

Waterworld ended up crumbling because of the explosion.

"In short! Such a thing! No matter what! Please do not do it ever again."

""Yes...."

Rin and Cecilia were being lectured by the big sister host, who was wearing a swimsuit just before, in her office. The two of them had shrunk a little.

Even though not getting anyone injured was a miracle, the arena's pool got half-destroyed, and the skylights had been shattered.

"Ah, I really can't stand it."

"Th-that."

"What is it?"

"Nothing, I don't know how to say it but the prize....."

"Do you think that we can have it?"

The big sister's eyes were full of killing intent.

""Sorry, it's nothing.""

Like this, Rin and Cecilia IS match made a mess at the competition place, and the competition was obviously invalidated. Which means that the winners don't get the prize. The two of them who bore a tiny hope by asking, were even more miserable after it was formally announced. In front of their eyes was pitch black.

"Anyways, it seems that the Academy will send someone here take you back, so behave for the time being."

""Yes...""

Though she said that, it's already past 5:00, and the landscape is getting painted by the orange color of the sunset, and the cicadas' noise outside is getting more clear.

Drriiinng...., the internal telephone rang loudly, and the big sister took it.

"Yes, this is the office. .....Aaaah, yes, I got it."

The big sister put down the telephone in a *klang*, and waved her hand to drive away Rin and Cecilia.

"The one getting you guys has arrived. Get out quickly ."

"Sorry..."

Badang! At that time even if the two of them heard the noise of the door closing, they still stood there stupidly staring the floor while walking.

"You two look really down, you were just lectured miserably, weren't you?"

""Huh?""

The two of them lift their heads at the same time.

"Yo!"

In front of them was standing the one who was supposed to accompany them today, Ichika.

"Yamada-sensei was the one supposed to come here, but due to some urgent issues she couldn't come. And since I just finished the data collecting, I took her place and----Waah!"

Before Ichika could finish up his sentence, Rin and Cecilia took a step towards him, got right in front of his face and grabbed his chest.

"You....."

"It's all Ichika's fault! Ichika's fault!"

After catching just a glimpse of those two 100% resentful sights, even Ichika couldn't help but say something quickly.

"Wa-wait a moment. I'm at fault, though I don't know what did. ----------OK, I'll invite you to eat something, how about a desert?"

"....."

Rin and Cecilia took a few seconds thinking before saying it in a little voice.

".....@cruise."

"......The most expensive limited ice cream ."

"Gwaa."

Each was worth 2500 yen. This amount was higher than what Ichika thought and made him press his head.

"What, are you backing down?"

"Do you think you have the right to refuse?"

"I know it... Ah....."

After Ichika's decision, the pair of girls immediately reversed the switch, and the depression of just before disappeared beyond the clouds, put on large smiles and rolled their arms around Ichika's.

"Then let's go."

"Ah! Cecilia, why are you pulling his arm! Ichika! I also want to pull yours!"

"What is it? By the way-----"

""It's painful to walk.""

Rin and Cecilia's voices merged together.

"Yeah!"

"It's like that."

"....."

Ichika sighed after the pair said it in simultaneously, and stepped while bearing the inconvenience of walking towards the families@cruise.

"Meh, I'll let you go this time."

"Though there isn't a next time."

"Yes, yes....."

Under the sunset there were three people's slender shadows, and the above was an anecdote which happened one day during the falling heat month of August.

Chapter 2: The Rhapsody of Two Kittens

"Laura Bodewig, 2nd Lieutenant, currently an IS test pilot."

Inside this dark room, the humidity's really so great it's unbearable. To clarify, this room is underground.

--oh yes, this...is the darkest part in my memories. This is the 'Anti-Interrogation Patience Training' I hated most in my military training.

This training facility was even used as an interrogation facility up until a few years ago...no, it was used as an interrogation facility. The black stain on the floor is likely unrelated to the humidity.

Then, it's the sound of water dripping. The water droplets would drop from the ceiling in beads from time to time, making her feel really irritated.

"How does it feel? Fufu, you don't look too good."

Weary and unable to stand up, Laura didn't bother answering such a question.

The woman should be the owner of this damned room, but her face couldn't be seen clearly. She was standing at a position opposite from where the light was shining in, and her hands were crossed behind her waist.

Her coarse voice sounded really clear. Maybe the humidity in this room caused the voice to feel really clear .

"How do you feel about not being able to eat for three days? Laura-kun? Hm?"

She hated to respond at this point in time because it would really drain her. She's really that tired now.

"Well, this is a classic interrogation. It's something that was used since a long time ago. In a room where the concept of time ceases, I won't let you sleep nor eat. I'll just make you listen to the water drop."

GAK *GAK*. As the hard soled shoes clattered, the woman took a few steps forward.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

Do whatever you want. That's right. She still muttered even though she had very little strength in her.

The woman who sat down on the chair twisted her neck slightly and slowly raised her leg up.

Extending out slight from the light was a shocking bare pair of legs.

--No uniform? Who-Who's she...

She's not a normal instructor. No, it's highly doubtful that she's even a soldier.

She thought the woman was the owner of the room, but it seemed like she was wrong. After considering for a while, she realized that the woman's tone was different from how the instructors would normally speak, and the volume was slightly louder.

(Who...is she? Why is she here?)

Unlike how they would wake my wavering thoughts, she became motivated all of a sudden. At this moment, she should consider how to take down the opponent.

(Oh yeah, first--)

"Flip the chair and then choke her on the neck—I wouldn't do that if I were you."

(Wh-Why--)

"Why do I know what you're thinking? That's because. .."

The woman's face peered out from the light.

Just the mouth section, as her eyes couldn't be seen.

A beauty—she's a beauty, right? Her jaw line's rather refined.

The nicely shaped lips say.

"... "

Unbelievably, that's something she couldn't hear.

To Laura, who's well versed in reading lips, she could easily understand even though it was mouthed silently.

But for some reason, she couldn't process those words.

Even so—

(Ahh...so that's the case.)

She understood it completely.

If that's the case, it couldn't be helped. A certain 'Factor ' gave her this idea with regards to those words.

"Alright, then let's begin our interrogation. Laura-kun, do you have a patriotic heart?"

"Of course I do."

"Fufu, it sure is easy for you to lie—you don't have a patriotic heart at all, right?"

"There's no such thing."

Oh well, never mind. The woman didn't care as she pulled out a notebook.

"Alright, where are your comrades? The scale? Armament level? And support is?"

"I can't say that."

"I see, well, as for this problem."

The woman's lips curled as she smiled.

Laura didn't care about the change in facial expression as she started to wonder how to take down the enemy in front of her.

"You have someone you like, right?"

Laura stopped thinking.

"What?"

"The name's Orimura I—"

"WHAT? ID-IDIOT! DO-DON'T SAY IT!!"

"Ahahaha! You're blushing. Really, that's cute."

"I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL KILL YOU!! I'LL KILL YOU!!!"

Having lost her fatigue and weakness, Laura stood up and leaped at her opponent.

And then—

"Ah, erm...Laura?"

"Uu...?"

The person whom she was pressing down on with a knife to her neck was her roommate Charlotte.

The location's the 1st year dormitory room in IS Academy, and it seems to be morning as the sparrows outside the window are all chirping away.

"Huh, well, I saw you having a nightmare, Laura, so I intended to wake you up."

"Is-Is that...so."

Now that Charlotte mentioned it, Laura found that she was sweating profusely, and the strands of hair sticking on her skin were making her feel irritated.

"...So, how long are we going to maintain this position?"

"Ye-Yeah, that's right...sorry."

Laura let go of the dagger that was pressing against Charlotte's carotid artery and backed away.

She couldn't remember what was in the dream, but it wasn't about something happy, right? Her flustered heart's telling her that.

"Well, never mind. I don't mind, really."

"Really? Thank you."

Even though she didn't know what to do about the room arrangement at the beginning, her roommate Charlotte's someone who understands others well, so right now, Laura's really grateful for this arrangement.

After that battle, Charlotte didn't seem to mind either as she stayed with her as a roommate and friend.

(I actually raised my knife at Charlotte...what was I thinking?)

Fuu. She sighed as she gets off the bed, and Charlotte gets off as well.

"Speaking of which, Laura."

"What is it?"

"Well—aren't you intending to putting on some clothes ?"

Charlotte again mentioned this. The reason why she would say this is because this Laura has the habit of not wearing anything when sleeping. Her reason is—

"I don't have clothes to wear when I sleep."

"No, maybe that's the case...but, ahh, you'll get a cold."

The towels that were normally hung around here were prepared for this. As usual, Charlotte draped the towel onto Laura.

"Fuu, sorry. Oh yeah, I'm going to take a shower. How about you?"

"Mn, I'll have one too. I have a bit of cold sweat too."

"How about we do it together?"

"No, that's not it! I'm talking about showering after you're done, Laura! Really!"

"I was joking."

Hearing her say this with a cold tone, Charlotte was stunned for a moment.

At this moment, Laura walked into the bathroom, and she heard the sound of the door being locked.

(She's not one who would really joke about. What's going on?)

Did she change emotionally? As her friend, this really bothered Charlotte.

(Oh well, better find a way to make her wear some nightwear.)

Mnn. Charlotte pondered early in the morning.

"Buying something?"

"Mn, that's right."

Laura and Charlotte were chatting away in the dorm cafeteria as they ate the breakfast a little earlier than usual.

Besides them, there were only a few students who took part in the club morning run, so it wasn't too crowded.

Their breakfasts were macaroni salad, toast and yogurt .

But Laura had an additional item.

"Ea-Eating steak so early in the morning...can your stomach take it?"

"What are you saying? When eating a lot in the morning, the efficiency to work will be greater. There's scientific proof for this. Strictly speaking, those who sleep—in other words, those who eat a lot during dinner are the weird ones. All the excess energy that can't be digested will become fat. I won't stop you if you want to grow fat."

"—Laura, where did you hear this from?"

"Ichika (My Bride) said so."

"Haa...I guess so. That tone doesn't sound like Laura at all."

A person with an impressionable personality is really unexpected Charlotte thought as she poked the macaroni through with her fork.

"Mu, what's that?"

"This...macaroni?"

"I know. I'm asking why are you letting it pass through the fork? Why didn't you just stab it in instead of letting the fork tip pierce through?"

The serious expression nearly caused Charlotte to be overwhelmed by Laura's presence, and she stumbled before she swallowed the macaroni.

"Even if you ask me, I...maybe I feel that I have to do this?"

"Oh, so you feel that you have to do it..."

"How about you, Laura? It's rather interesting, you know."

After saying that, Charlotte mysteriously noticed—

(U, was I a little too childish...? It's Laura, maybe she--)

"Oh, it is interesting—"

"Re-Really? That's great!"

"—If you think that's interesting, your mind really has a problem."

"..."

(No, no no, that's not true! Yeah! Laura definitely won't say such things!)

"Charlotte."

--*BYU!!*

"That's really interesting. Uu...since it's rare, I'll try to use all the tips of the fork to pierce through the macaroni. "

After saying that, Laura immediately started playing with the other macaroni bits.

It seems that Laura really found it interesting, and this made Charlotte heave a sigh of relief.

"Mu, ku, this is a lot harder than I imagined it to be... over here."

The last macaroni just wouldn't go through, and Laura was in a tight fight.

For some reason, Charlotte remembered the cat she used to keep, and looked at Laura.

(That cat was really clumsy in the same weird aspects. It kept chasing the ball of thread and even showed a look of disbelief after finding that it wasn't a ball anymore.)

"I SUCCEEDED!"

"WAHHH!!!"

Laura gently raised the fork that pierced through the macaroni, and Charlotte applauded her. The other girls in the cafeteria just blinked and looked around, wondering what happened.

"When are we going shopping?"

"Ah, yeah, I planned to go out around 10. What do you think? An hour of shopping, and then we'll go eat at a nice shop."

"I see. Since it's a rare chance, I should invite my bride along. Yup, I'll be a good husband."

"Ah, ahaha...that's right..."

"Not in the room, and he didn't answer his phone. Where did he go to—is he cheating on us?"

"No, huh, it can't be helped if he's not around."

"I can contact him if I use the IS private channel, right? Let's do that then."

"WAH! NO! DON'T DO THAT, LAURA! I mean, even if it's part of the IS function, using it like that isn't good, you know."

"Forget about that. It's more important to find my bride."

"...Orimura-sensei will get angry."

Pyu! Laura stopped.

"Tha-That's right. Private time is necessary at times. Okay, Charlotte, let's go there on our own."

"Okay, let's go."

They return back to their room as they prepare to leave the Academy.

Of course, they have to change into casual clothes—logically, that should be the case.

"Erm, Laura, what's with that military uniform?"

"Uu, this is a uniform for formal occasions, unfortunately, I don't have any casual clothes."

"..."

Even Charlotte was about to hug her head. Speaking of which, she never saw Laura dressed as an ordinary girl even though they're in the same room.

"Laura, just wear the school uniform...your country won't be happy if you wear that uniform out, right?"

"That does make sense. Okay, I'll change into the uniform."

Laura then changed clothes at a speed that was not what a girl would change at, and they spent only 15 minutes changing before they left the room.

"Let's take the bus ride to the station."

"Okay."

The bus arrived at the station as they reached there, so the two girls boarded the bus first. It was summer vacation and past 10am, so the bus was rather empty.

Unlike Laura who was dressed in uniform, Charlotte was wearing casual clothes. It was a white dress with light blue color, and it had the presence of summer as it radiated a cooling and casual feeling.

Amongst the buses in this city, this bus was rare. There was no air-conditioning, so the wind blew in through the window, giving a cool sensation.

(Speaking of which, I haven't admired this scene properly. Since it's rare, let's just go out more.)

The breeze gently passed through the window and grazed Charlotte as she looked out of the window. Her hair was fluttering slightly, glowing blonde under the bright summer sun.

Beside her, Laura was seriously looking at the houses in this city.

(...That building can be used as a sniping location, and if it becomes a dragged out battle, the mart opposite can become a place to maintain supplies. Also, just in case, I should check the underground sewers and subways map , and I need to check if there are any independent electrical generators nearby.)

Laura, with her silver hair glittering under the bright sunlight, along with those sharp eyes of hers, was giving off a rather out of place presence.

"Hey, hey, look at both of them."

"Uwa, they're really pretty!~"

"Those girls are rather cute. Are they models?"

"Really? The silver-haired girl's wearing...a uniform? I've never seen that before."

"Idiot, that's IS Academy's uniform! It's custom made!"

"Huh!? I heard that only 1 out of millions are chosen to enter IS Academy?"

"That's right. Only the elites get to enter."

"Uwa~ so outstanding yet so pretty. Isn't that too unfair..."

"Well, gods are unfair. That's always the case."

The female high school students are staring at Charlotte and Laura as they create a ruckus.

In the cramped space of the bus, such intense conversations naturally spread to the two girls' ears.

"..."

Charlotte lowered her head in embarrassment, probably because she was never praised like this before.

On the other hand, Laura just ignored their ramblings as she continued to 'Check the statuses of wartime street fights'.

(IS are the most powerful and incomparable force in the world. However, a war can't be decided with just one person's battle ability. In troop fighting in the streets, we have to deploy our defensive line as troops.)

If they could level this entire street into wasteland, the IS would be useful.

(--While taking down the entire city, if we can consider using large transport aircraft to bombard this place, we need some anti-air weapons that can be mobilized independently. Also, it's best if we can supply the troops with some anti-air missiles. Javelin and Starstreak missiles can be used to attack vehicles. And most important--)

"Laura, Laura."

"Hn? What?"

"We're at the station. Alright, stop thinking and get off."

"Got it."

Both of them get off the bus with some other passengers, and walked into the shopping center in front of the station.

Charlotte took out a magazine from her bag, looking at it and the directory to check where they were.

"Okay, I got it. If we go in this order, we won't waste too much time."

"Oh."

"We'll first look at clothes, and then we'll go get lunch. After that, I want to shop for some life accessories and little decorations. Don't you agree, Laura?"

"I don't understand any of these, so I'll leave it to you then."

Laura was still alien to what girls in their teens would do. Though she's a teenager herself, she doesn't understand all these at all, so it couldn't be helped.

--Even so, Laura still felt weird.

Laura's naturally a stubborn girl, but even so, she couldn't resist Charlotte's words at all as she easily agreed to what Charlotte would say. Normally speaking, this girl called Laura would forcefully decide on what she wants to do even though she doesn't understand it.

(Unbelievable.)

Charlotte has an indescribable charisma.

If there's a need to describe it, maybe it's similar to a mother Laura didn't know of.

"Are you listening, Laura?"

"Hm? Ohh, sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Really~ I'm asking you if you want skirts or pants."

"Mn, both of them will—"

"Don't say that both of them will do...speaking of which, Laura, you're really like Ichika in this aspect."

Charlotte inadvertedtly sighed, and Laura showed a happy look for some reason.

"It's good that both husband and wife are alike."

Thinking that it's stupid to get angry at Laura with regards to this, Charlotte sighed again and ended this conversation.

"Anyway, let's go to the 7th level. The 5th and 6th level are also for females, so we'll just go according to order."

"Hm? Why must we go from the top? Can't we go from bottom to top?"

"It's easier to shop if we go from top to bottom. You see, aren't the shops designed like that as well?"

Hearing Charlotte say this, Laura looked at the book she opened. However...

"I don't understand at all."

"~Uu, well, I'm telling you that there's winter clothing sold in the lower levels! It should be a change of seasons soon, but there's still summer wear at the clearance sales, so let's go there first—"

"Hold on, I don't need winter clothing."

"Huh? No need...why?"

"It's summer now."

Laura said it so casually, yet Charlotte was completely dumbstruck.

"I can just wait until winter to buy winter clothing."

"No, well...listen to me. Girls would normally prepare their clothing before the season changes."

"I see—well, it would be too late if we prepare our supplies and soldiers once war starts. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Huh...yeah, I guess you can say that."

"So it's called preparing for rainy days."

Though this was purely what a girl would think in a feminine manner, Laura thought this through using her own logic.

Since it was weird to deny Laura's views, Charlotte accepted it.

"Anyway, let's just go in order. If you have things you don't understand, just ask me."

"Okay, it's good to have Charlotte around. You're really reliable."

They took the elevator to the 7th level. As it still was summer vacation, there were many teenage girls in the mall with the air conditioning turned on at full blast.

"It would troublesome if we get lost. How about we hold hands?"

"Y-Yeah."

In contrast to the carefree Charlotte, Laura felt shy as she nodded her head, but she still agreed even though she felt weird.

"Then let's start from here."

"'Third Surface'...that's a weird name."

"This shop seems to be popular. See, there are a lot of girls inside."

Now that Charlotte mentioned it, Laura noticed a lot of high school and middle school girls inside.

As there's a closing sale, the shop's really bustling, so it's to be expected that the shop would accommodate the customers more. However—

"..."

PAKII!! The paper bag the shopkeeper was handing over to the customer dropped.

"Blond hair and silver hair...?"

Noticing the shopkeeper acting rather abnormal, the other shop attendants turned to look over.

And then, everyone looked mesmerized as they say,

"They look like dolls..."

"Are they filming...?"

"...Yuri, I'll hand the customer over to you..."

Seeing both of them, the shopkeeper stumbled and went over. It seemed that she just became mesmerized by the devil, or at least she had heatstroke.

"Hol-Hold on, huh? Wha-What about me? Speaking of which, the clothes...are still on the floor..."

After seeing Charlotte and Laura, the female customer who was about to complain just shut up.

The two beauties seemed to just walk out of a painting. Not to mention their slender fingers that are held together mesmerize all.

They're not holding hands tightly, but they're still together.

This made both of them emit an indescribable feeling.

"Ma-May-May I know what kind of clothing are you looking for?"

The shopkeeper let out an excited voice, and anyone could tell that she was excited. She didn't look like a mature woman who was used to wearing summer attire.

The interesting attitude of the shopkeeper made Charlotte forget about leaving the shop due to the overwhelming stares.

"Huh, I'm looking for clothes for this girl. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Yes, this silver-haired girl, right? I'll look for it now, no problems!"

Immediately after saying that, the shopkeeper took the clothes off the fake model that's obviously used for display only.

--Also, even though these are summer clothes, but clothes that would be sold out anyway would be hung on the display at the shop's doors to attract customers. These clothes are obviously meant to be sold, but since they're prepared for 'Important Customers', normally speaking, they wouldn't be removed for first-time customers.

That's right, normally speaking.

"How-How is it? This white summer shirt should match your beautiful silver hair, Miss."

"Heh, light and translucent. I can see the clothes underneath. What do you think, Laura?"

"I—"

"Don't say that you don't know."

"Uuu..."

As what she wanted to say was blocked off, Laura pouted, a rare sight at that.

That childish expression made the shopkeeper who felt that the silver-haired girl was silent blink a few times in surprise.

"White? It's nothing bad, I'm wearing this color now anyway."

"Ah, yes."

On hearing this response that's not feminine at all, the shopkeeper couldn't help but respond blankly.

"Since it's a rare chance, don't you want to try it, Laura ?"

"No, it's too—"

"Don't say that it's troublesome."

As her words were blocked again, Laura remained silent.

During this time, Charlotte and the shopkeeper chose a lower-half clothing and a matching shirt.

"I'll have the denim pants. As for the shirt..."

"How about a V-neck woolen sweater?"

"Ah, that's nice. Should I choose the same type of color or a contrasting type...hm."

Both of them happily chose Laura's clothing.

Realizing that resistance was futile, Laura could only stand slightly far away and look at them.

(Really, what's so interesting about that?)

I just need the clothes to fulfill their function. That's really how Laura would think.

"Okay Laura, try this."

"I understand."

"The changing room's over here."

As the shopkeeper lead her to the changing room, Laura sighed.

(This can't be helped, but since it's a rare chance to wear casual clothes, I really hope that Ichika can see it.)

Thinking about this, Laura took off her uniform.

The white silky skin was lit by the lights, making her look like an ice beauty.

(...)

She again examined her own body. Even though her body with only underwear on it was beautiful, there's a refined feel to it as she trained herself physically.

(I'm not too sure about this, but is my body lacking charm to the opposite gender?)

Especially to Ichika.

(Uu...)

She tried to pose according to the poses she saw in those photo galleries.

The images in those photos were really alluring, and the body that was wearing underwear made it really alluring to the opposite gender.

"...Baka baka!"[4B 1]

Feeling really embarrassed about what she just did, Laura continued to change after saying those words.

Looking through the clothes Charlotte and the shopkeeper chose for her, she found that they were all the 'Cool' type.

(If I have to wear it, I should choose the cute one. Then Ichika would praise me--)

...

"Laura's clothing is really cute."

"Just the clothing?"

"Laura's still the cutest of all."

"Ba-Baka..."

"Your underwear's cute too, right?"

"Huh, ah..."

"Let me see, Laura."

"U-Uu..."

...

Even though this was all just her imagination, Laura still blushed as she remained silent.

"No, that's not it! Well...how should I put it? I don't think it'll be that successful, but..."

However, the probability's not zero.

"How is it, Laura? Have you changed yet?"

Behind the door, the familiar voice of Charlotte rang out.

Laura quickly put on the uniform and opened the door .

"That's strange. Why are you still in uniform...?"

"Charlotte."

"Y-Yeah. Well, you didn't like that,,,?"

"No, that's not it. Even so..."

It was rare to see Laura stutter, and Charlotte had a question mark above her head.

"Make-Make it a little cuter..."

Laura really looked childish as she said that, stunning Charlotte.

But she immediately recovered and nodded her head hard.

"Mn, mn! It's better to be cute! I'll prepare it for you. Just wait!"

Laura, who was lacking enthusiasm a while back, just said something really unexpected, making Charlotte agree with an even more enthusiastic tone.

"Th-The-Then, what kind of clothing will be better? Color, build, what's your view?"

"We-Well, it's better to have a suitable amount of skin revealed..."

"Mn, I got it!"

Charlotte immediately went back to the shopkeeper and looked through the colorful clothes.

"I'll take that strapless dress, and a ring as decoration. And let's see..."

Charlotte looked absolutely delighted as she chose the clothes, seemingly choosing them for herself.

"If you want clothes that show a lot of skin, the black one will be a steady bet! It matches your hair, Laura."

"I-I'll be troubled if it's too glamorous."

As Laura was feeling somewhat nervous on seeing Charlotte work so hard, she couldn't help but warn her, but Charlotte's response was full of drive.

"No problem at all—! Just relax and leave it to me!"

"I-I understand."

Seeing the normally reliable and mature Charlotte become this determined, Laura could only obey her.

(But her tastes are better than mine, so there shouldn't be any problem.)

20 minutes later, as Laura changed and walked out of the changing room, everyone in the shop gasped.

"UWA, SHE'S SO PRETTY..."

"SHE'S JUST LIKE A FAIRY..."

After receiving the stares of everyone in the shop, Laura couldn't help but be embarrassed.

She was wearing a black strapless dress with some frills on it, creating a cute look.

Like everyone mentioned, the way Laura was dressed in a slightly-shorter-than-a-mini-skirt dress matches her refined presence like a fairy.

"You-You even prepared the shoes? I'm shocked."

"It's rare anyway. It'll be a pity if you don't wear any mules."

Wearing heeled shoes for the first time, Laura lost her balance.

While everyone went 'Ah!', Charlotte picked her up.

"So-Sorry."

"Don't worry."

Supporting Laura's hand, Charlotte bowed.

The two people who looked like a prince and a princess looked like they fit into a scene in a fairy tale.

"Can-Can I take a photo?"

"Me-Me too!"

"Please shake hands with me!"

"Me too me too!"

Both of them were surrounded all of a sudden. Everyone, the people in the shop and the people outside looking in at the commotion all squeezed in, and there was a commotion for quite a while.

"Hoo, that was tiring."

"To think that we would end up spending so much time here."

At just past noon, both of them are having lunch at the open-aired café.

Laura ordered the pasta that was of a different flavor everyday, and Charlotte ordered lasagna. Both of them are enjoying their food.

"But it doesn't matter much anyway. We got our clothes anyway."

"Since you bought it, might as well change into it."

"No, well, about that, actually, it'll be bad if I stain it."

"Oh? Ah, are you going to show it to Ichika the first time you wear it?"

"What? No, that's not it! Th-That Tha-That's not true at all!"

Seeing Laura blushing and all flustered, Charlotte believed that she had it right, but she pretended to be oblivious.

"Okay, sorry for saying such weird stuff."

"Re-Rea-Really!"

"Laura."

"Wha-What?"

"You're holding your fork and spoon in the opposite manner."

"Uu~!"

After Charlotte pointed that out, Laura found out she was holding her cutlery the wrong way, and this really made her blush. The spoon that was about to reach her mouth moved away.

"Wha-What are we going to do in the afternoon?"

"Shop for some life accessories. I want to check the watches out. I really like Japanese watches."

"You want to buy a watch?"

"Mn, it's rare anyway. Don't you want to buy something, Laura? Something Japanese?"

After thinking for a while, Laura simply said,

"A Japanese Sword."

"...Something more feminine?"

"No."

"Something more feminine?"

"None."

Laura answered immediately. Though it was to be expected, after hearing her cold response, Charlotte's shoulders dropped dejectedly.

Suddenly, Charlotte noticed the woman sitting in the next table.

"...What should I do? Really..."

Her age's about between 25 to 30, and she's wearing tight-fitting suit.

She seemed to be depressed as the garlic and pepper pasta that was served was all cold now.

"Haa..."

They could feel that she was really depressed from her sighing.

"Hey, Laura."

"There's a limit to being nosy."

This time, Laura cut off what Charlotte was about to say.

Even though she was shocked by Laura's response, Charlotte looked rather happy and continued,

"So you understand me well."

"Just-Just about there...so, what do you want to do?"

"Hm, anyway, let's hear her out first."

After saying that, Charlotte got up from her seat and talked to the woman.

"Excuse me...what's wrong?"

"Huh--?"

On seeing them, *BATAM!* That woman suddenly stood up and grabbed Charlotte's hands.

"You-You two!"

"Wha-What's the matter?"

"Do you want to work?"

""HUH?""

"So those two suddenly resigned. I think they eloped instead of resigning though. Haha..."

"Ah."

"Mn."

"But today's a very important day! The main office will send people over to check on us, so please help. Just for today! I hope that you'll work today."

That woman's shop was a unique café.

The girls would dress like maids, and the guys would dress as butlers to serve the customers—it's the so-called maid (and butler) café.

"I'm okay with that..."

Having changed clothes, Charlotte hid her emotions and asked,

"But why am I dressed as a butler...?"

"Because you see, it really suits you! You're more handsome and cool than those guys over there!"

"Really..."

Even though she was praised, Charlotte sighed, unable to be happy.

(I want to wear a maid outfit too...Laura looks so cute wearing it...)

Feeling really regretful, Charlotte glanced at the butler attire on her.

(Uu~ am I more suited to this image...)

Perhaps realizing that Charlotte looked rather downhearted, the shopkeeper who was also in maid outfit grabbed her hand tightly.

"There's no problem. It suits you well!"

"Is-Is that so? Ahaha..."

Though she looked rather stiff, Charlotte answered back with a smile.

(That's where the problem lies...)

With complicated feelings of a girl, she again turns to look at Laura who's dressed in a maid outfit.

The graceful maid outfit had a slender yet strong body in the midst of it, and her straight silver hair encompassed everything, including the mysterious looking eyepatch.

(Uu~ I'm so envious! Why must Laura be this cute...)

She once again realized Laura's charm.

Even when wearing men's clothing, Laura would look like a 'Cool Girl', or at least that's what Charlotte thought.

In contrast, once she puts on men's clothing, she would be a 'Cute Guy'. Thinking about this, she naturally sighed .

"Shopkeeper~ please help out~"

The floor manager asked for help. The shopkeeper immediately applied the final touches and walked to the entrance at the back.

"We-Well, I have one last question."

"Hm?"

"What's the name of this shop?"

The shopkeeper smiled and pulled her skirt up, bowing as she lifted her skirt in a cute manner that doesn't match her mature appearance.

"Dear customers, welcome to @Cruise."

"Dunois-kun, I'll leave the red tea and coffee for Table 4 to you."

"Okay."

Charlotte received the drinks and put them the tray that has the @Cruise logo on it.

This simple action had such a high elegance to it. At that moment, the workers who became Charlotte's coworkers were all amazed at her elegance.

It was her first time working, yet she was fearless in her gestures. Graceful, but not annoying.

The female customers seemed to be mesmerized by Charlotte's gesture.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. May I know who ordered red tea?"

"M-Me."

Even though she was older, the woman looked nervous as she answered Charlotte.

After passing the red tea and coffee to the female customers, Charlotte asked them if they needed a ' Certain Service' in the shop.

"Do you need sugar and milk? If you do, please allow me to serve both of you."

"Pl-Please do so. U-Umm, I'll have more sugar and milk."

"Me-Me too."

Actually, these two customers normally wouldn't add sugar or milk, but they just want to enjoy this beautiful butler service, so they deliberately answered ***him***.

Perhaps seeing through their thoughts, Charlotte showed a gentle smile and nodded her head.

"I understand. Then, please excuse me."

Charlotte's beautiful slender white fingers held onto the spoon lightly as she silently added sugar and milk and mixed them in the cups.

Even the occasional light knocking sound caused the female customers to hold their breaths.

"Please enjoy."

"Th-Thanks..."

One of the customers received the cup from Charlotte's hands, looking extremely tense as she brings it to her mouth.

Then, the other female customer who let Charlotte stir her cup looked extremely tense as she coughed once.

"Then, if there's any need, please call me again, ojou-samas."

After saying that, Charlotte bowed beautifully and gave off a huge 'Princely' presence. The female customers just looked stunned, and a simple nod from her was the limit for them.

(Ohh, the service industry's really tough. Is Laura going to be alright?)

Charlotte continued to work as she looked for Laura.

And then she saw Laura taking orders from three male customers.

"Huh, you're pretty cute? Mind telling me your name?"

"..."

"Hey there, tell me, what time are you dismissed from work? Let's go out—s"

DAM! The table got slammed on (or more like thrown over), letting out a huge clank from the teacups, and the liquid inside spilled down.

As the guys got shocked, Laura said with a cold tone,

"This is water, drink it."

"And one with attitude at that! I want to know you more—"

As he spoke halfway without even ordering, Laura left their table.

Then, she went to the bar and said some words. After that, she put a drink on the tray and walked over.

"Drink it."

Laura placed the cup on the table in a slightly gentler manner (as the coffee tray would break). Even so, the coffee still spilled out from the cup.

"Huh, erm, I don't think I ordered coffee..."

"What? If you're not a customer, get out."

"No-No, that's not it, I just want to check out the items on the menu..."

Perhaps he got a good impression on Laura or got taken aback by Laura's no-buts mentality, as the guy continued to find suitable words to talk to her.

In fact, in this society where women reign supreme, people who dare to talk up girls like this are either brave souls or idiots. These guys are definitely the latter.

"Lik-Like I said, even if it's coffee, there's mocca or Kilimanjaro coffee or something..."

Laura's eyes weren't smiling as it seemed that she wanted to interrupt them. She gave a sneer.

"What? Can you ordinary blokes taste the difference?"

"Huh, that...sorry..."

In the end, the guys lost under the absolute zero stare and mockery of Laura as she backed away to let them drink their coffee.

"Get out once you people are done. Stop hogging the seats."

"Yes..."

The German Ice side of Laura still remains.

But the hard-to-approach attitude of hers, coupled with her pretty looks seemed to become a charm, as the male customers in the shop were giving a 'I want to be served the same manner'.

"That-That girl's amazing..."

"I want to be scolded by her, stared down by her, looked down by her!"

Even though quite a few customers were rather excited , the other customers and even the staff members pretended not to notice it as they continued with that work.

"We-Well, can I add another order? If possible, I'll have that blond butler!"

"I want coffee! Can the silver-haired maid come over?"

"I want the bishounen butler!"

"I want the bishoujo maid!"

This commotion spread throughout the entire shop, causing an explosive ruckus.

Feeling really troubled, Charlotte and Laura didn't know what to do, but the shopkeeper moved in and directed them to whichever table they needed to go to and controlled the way they were called. As expected of a professional, the shopkeeper was clear on the instructions, and they skillfully finished serving 5 times the usual number of customers.

This chaotic situation maintained itself for about 2 hours. As Charlotte and Laura were mentally tired, something happened.

"EVERYONE, DON'T MOVE!!!"

Three men broke in and shouted loudly.

For a while everyone present didn't know what was going on, but after hearing a gunshot, someone screamed .

"KYAAAAHHHH!!!"

"SHUT UP! BE QUIET!!"

The men were dressed in jackets and jeans. Their heads were masked and they had guns. They also had quite a lot of bank notes in the bags behind them.

In one look, anyone could tell that they were robbers, and they had just robbed a bank.

The 20th century manga attire stunned everyone, but that was something else altogether. Besides, they were savage criminals with guns, so everyone had to follow their orders.

"HELLO—THE ROBBERS INSIDE! YOU'RE ALREADY SURROUNDED! HURRY UP AND SURRENDER! I REPEAT—"

The police sealed off the place extremely fast, creating a yellow area in front of the station. Looking through the windows, the patrol cars sealed off the roads outside the shop, and they were policemen dressed in bulletproof vests and riot shields in their hands, forming a perimeter.

"...For some reason—"

"...The police are responding in the same manner."

"...How old fashioned..."

Several customers remembered the old-chronicles of history that wouldn't be useful to teenagers, forgetting that they were hostages as they muttered.

"Wha, what do we do, aniki[4B 2]!? If this keeps up, we'll all—"

"Don't panic! There's nothing to panic. We have hostages. They can't force their way in."

What looks like the leader of the trio, a relatively well-built man said this, and the other two that wanted to run away naturally regained their confidence.

"He-Hehe, that's right! We have lots of cash to get this. "

DUKIN! As the hard sound of metal could be heard, the men started loading their pump-action shotguns, and then shot at the ceiling to terrify them.

"KYAAAHHH!!"

As the lights shattered, the (mentally) lost female customers let out an ear piercing scream. In response, the leader fired a pistol to make her shut up.

"SHUT UP! WE WON'T KILL YOU IF YOU FOLLOW WHAT WE DO, GOT IT!?"

The woman went pale and nodded a few times, biting her lips tight for fear that she could let out her voice.

"HEY, THE POLICE OUTSIDE, YOU CAN HEAR ME, RIGHT!? IF YOU WANT ALL THE HOSTAGES TO ESCAPE SAFELY, PREPARE A CAR FOR US HERE! OF COURSE, YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SEND CARS AFTER US, NOR ARE YOU ALLOWED TO PUT A TRACKING DEVICE ON US!!"

After the man shouted that coolly, he added a 'This is payment for being our gofer' and shot at the cops.

Luckily, the bullet only broke the window of a patrol car, but that was enough to scare the surrounding onlookers.

"Hehe, these guys are in a mess."

"Someone said that 'It's easier to commit a crime in a peaceful country', so that's true after all!"

"Yeah."

The men gave vicious smiles, but a pair of eyes were observing them.

(One of them has a shotgun, another has a submachine gun, and the boss has a pistol. There may be other weapons prepared, but anyway--)

Charlotte continued to keep low as she calmly analyzed the situation.

Checking the situation in the shop again, she moved her eyes, but suddenly widened them in shock.

Other than the criminals, the only one standing in the shop was Laura. Besides, the pretty girl that would dazzle anyone with her silver hair and eyepatch would make anyone want to stop for her.

"What's with you? Didn't I tell you to be quiet?"

Unexpectedly, the boss went over. Laura just glanced at his gun and looked away.

"Hey, are you listening? Or do you not know Japanese ?"

"Forget about it, Aniki. Isn't this good? We have lots of time, so let's get this girl to serve us!"

"Ah? What are you saying, kid?"

"Because you see, she's really cute!"

"I-I agree! I've never been to a maid café before..."

The two henchmen snickered, looking rather excited yet shy. The boss frowned, and sat down on the sofa.

"Humph, oh well, I'm thirsty anyway. Hey, bring me the menu!"

Glancing at the three men, Laura didn't look back as she walked to the bar.

And brings out a jug of water with ice filled to the brim.

"...What's this?"

"Water."

"No, we want a menu..."

"Shut up and drink it—if you dare."

Laura suddenly spun the tray, and the ice water naturally dances in mid-air. It seems that she wanted to overturn it as she grabbed the ice—and flicked it out.

"OUCH!! WH-WHA-WHAT ARE YOU—"

That was an ice bullet from Laura's finger as the ice bullet immediately knocked out the index finger, separating it from the trigger. The eyelids, eyebrows and throat got struck while he was defenseless.

And before the criminal could even roar, Laura launched a knee-strike at another guy's abdomen.

"STOP MESSING AROUND! YOU PUNK!!"

Quick to recover from the pain, the boss immediately started firing.

The explosion of the bullet could be heard, but it didn't hit Laura.

Laura used everything in the shop, including sofa, tables, plants, vending machines as cover as her slender body darted through them at an unimaginable speed.

"An-Aniki! This-This brat—"

"SHUT UP! SHE'S JUST A PUNK, HURRY UP AND DEAL WITH—"

"—Unfortunately for you, there's not just one."

Closing in behind the boss while he was reloading was a bishounen dressed in butler attire—correction, it's the bishoujo Charlotte.

Saying this, Charlotte sighed in pity. The reason wasn't just because she got involved in some needless criminal activity, but also that Laura took action without waiting—and that she had to support her.

"WHAT!? You—"

"Ah, good thing I'm in butler attire. Yup, then I can lift my leg without worry."

Charlotte said that as she kicked the pistol off the boss' fingers.

Then, she raised her leg, and it landed on the shoulder of the man who was holding the shotgun, making him unable to fight back. With a crisp rattling sound, the man's arm that was holding the shotgun fell in a limp.

Both of them were already used to it—because, this isn't some hi-level combat.

This was also proof of how many tough battles they'd been through.

Once someone becomes a personal IS pilot, any country would have a mock training session for 'All possible scenarios', and that applies for representative cadets as well.

They're trained to overcome difficulties even when they can't deploy their ISes.

Of course, Laura, who was a soldier, had much better skills, reaction ability and physical ability than Charlotte, who was not from military personnel.

But it wasn't too much of a problem for her to handle this.

"Target 2's taken down—Laura, what about you?"

"No problems. Target 3's taken down as well."

Both of them confirmed that the two henchmen had lost all consciousness and mobility (they're knocked out), and nodded at each other.

Only the final target was left—the boss. As expected, the guy who got his finger kicked readied his pistol in his left hand, trying to stand up.

"ST-STOP MESSING AROUND!! HOW, HOW CAN I, HOW CAN I LOSE TO TWO BRATS LIKE THAT...!"

The moment he was about to squeeze the trigger, Laura went leaping forward like a bullet.

Turning around to dodge the first bullet, Charlotte stepped on the special @Cruise tray under her foot.

The 'Item' that was stepped on the edge flew in mid-air , and flew to Laura's hand that was just there.

It was a black killer object with a blunt glow. Laura grabbed the pistol that could kill at will and pointed it at the boss' forehead.

"Too slow. Die."

"Huh? Laura, hold—"

CLANK! What hit the boss' head wasn't a bullet, but the butt of the pistol. The man fell onto the floor lifelessly like a puppet with its strings cut, lying motionlessly.

"All targets secured."

"...Haa, I was scared there for a while..."

"Because if you said that, amateurs would hesitate and wouldn't squeeze the trigger. That's the correct way to deal with this."

"No, well, even so."

--Laura won't really shoot it.

Charlotte didn't say it out.

The shop went quiet for quite a while. Stunned by this fast roller-coaster-like situation, the 'Civilians', the customers and workers started trembling as they looked up.

"Is-Is it over...?"

"We're save..."

"How, how did we..."

Though everyone knew that they were safe, they couldn't understand the situation and could only blink frantically and stare blankly at Laura and Charlotte.

And the shopkeeper, who hadn't fully recovered, was thinking of something completely unrelated—that was, a report to the main office 'A pretty silver-haired maid and handsome blond male (female) butler took down bank robbers'. Would the company believe her...?

"We- WE'RE SAVED!"

"THANK GOODNESS! THAN-THANK YOU, MAID-SAN, BUTLER-SAN, THANK YOU!!"

Everyone in the shop probably felt some surreal sense now and a commotion spread throughout the shop.

Seeing this situation, the police squads determined the current situation and rushed up.

"Fuu, the Japanese police are rather outstanding too."

"Argh, Laura! We're representative candidates and personal IS pilots. Got to avoid being the focus of attention!"

"You're right. Got to say sorry to everyone else then."

As expected, even with the police squads carrying out traffic control, the media reporters went through the forbidden boundary and rushed in.

--But things went for the worst.

"I'LL BLOW EVERYTHING UP INSTEAD OF GOING TO JAIL!"

The boss whom everyone thought was unconscious lost his mind as he stood up, flipping open the jacket flaps on both side.

Plastic explosives could be seen on the inside of his jacket, and it seemed like it could blow up a 40 meter place. Of course, the ignition trigger was in his hands.

"Wa--..."

"Still so old-fashioned until the end~..."

Someone accidentally said this, but there's even more fear in the shop now. However—

"Really, you don't know when to give up."

Laura suddenly lifted her right foot as if she was trying to lift her skirt, and the white fabric that was barely seen under the skirt attracted the male gaze. At that moment, she used this time to stamp the foot down.

The heel hit the table, which then tumbled, and the pistol on the table flew out. Charlotte rolled out from behind and grabbed that pistol. And then—

DA DA DA DA DA!!

"Checkmate!"

She quickly fired five X2 bullets, and they landed accurately on the ignition setup, the explosion fuse and the wires.

"Wanna continue?"

"Your arm will be next."

The sounds of two pistols being knocked together made the guy lose his forced viciousness as he trembled and apologized.

"So-Sorry, SORRY! I, I WON'T DO IT AGAIN! I PROMISE! PLEASE SPARE ME..."

Without listening to the declaration of surrender, Laura and Charlotte left the scene calmly like a black whirlwind.

"It's evening now."

2 hours after the incident happened, both of them finished what they wanted to buy and left the shopping mall in front of the station. It's only now that they realized that the sky's orange.

"Have you gotten all that you want?"

"Yup. Speaking of which, Laura. You wanted to buy your own stuff, but you ended up saying 'I'll leave it to you then' or 'Anything that suits you'. You can't do that as a girl."

"Don't rattle on trivial things. You'll age really fast."

"I-I'M NOT OLD!"

In fact, Charlotte even thought of something, so Laura's words made her jump.

What she thought about—was Ichika.

(Speaking of which, he's really like an old man at times ...)

In other words, she may have more or less gotten influenced by him unknowingly.

Thinking about this, she can't just say that Laura's ' Easily Influenced'.

"Ah yes. Let's go to the park opposite."

"The park?"

"Mn. The Castle Park. It was formerly a fortress."

"Oh, that's interesting. I heard that Japanese fortresses were hard to break through. Even though they're just remains of a fortress, there's value in seeing this."

Laura still viewed this from a military perspective, but Charlotte couldn't say anything with regards to that. Everyone had their own feelings, people had to observe, understand and not force things on each other.

"Speaking of which, we really bought a lot of stuff. The shopkeeper secretly gave us money and we ended up buying a lot more than what we expected. That was a great help."

"Uu, money? Speaking of which, my account should have about 20 million Euros—"

"Huh? You have that much money?"

"Ahh, well, I was affiliated to the military when I was born anyway. And ever since I became an IS representative candidate, I got more money."

(I got a similar funding but I never had so much money...)

"But I don't know how to get the money because I never withdrew money before."

"Ah—hm, I see...it's a good thing that you saved up a lot. I'll teach you how to use the money then."

"Mn, I'll leave it to you then. But that's because I didn't need money up till now. The army's supplies were enough for me, and it's the same when doing undercover . I won't take anything other than from the briefing people, or else I'll reveal myself too easily."

"Let's not mention that then. Anyway, after we go to the park, let's see if there's a crepes stall around."

"Hm? Crepes stalls? Why?"

"Well, during rest time in the shop, someone in the shop told me a charm 'You'll be really fortunate if you can eat a mixed berry crepes from the crepes stall in this park'."

"'Charm'...is it some Japanese occult?"

"Umm, it's good luck."

"Oh, a good omen."

I see. Laura nodded her head, but Charlotte gave a slightly troubled look.

(Uu—it's not wrong to say that, but wouldn't it be more feminine to call it a charm?)

Even so, Laura still followed along, so Charlotte immediately began looking for the shop.

But there was no need to look for it, as the shop was right in front of them.

The shop stood there, and a lot of high school girls were gathered around it, probably because club activities ended or they just went out.

"Let's hurry up and go there then!"

Charlotte grabbed Laura's hand with both hands and walked towards the mobile crepes shop that was modified from a van.

"Sorry, please give me two mixed berry crepes."

On hearing Charlotte's words, the 25-year-old male shopkeeper with a moustache politely lowered his head and said,

"Ahh—I'm sorry. We're sold out on mixed berry flavor today."

"Ah, I see. That's a pity....do you want another flavor, Laura?"

"Hm? I want strawberry and grape then."

Laura raised both fingers to indicate that she wanted two and even got ready to pay.

"No need for that, Laura. I'll pay here. You came here with me anyway."

"Is that so? Don't mind it. I'm just trying out how to spend my salary. What's my score?"

The tone was not like a teenage girl, but Charlotte could only give up after hearing Laura say this so earnestly.

"100 points."

"Fufufu, I knew it."

Laura said that happily and received the crepes from the boss.

"Which one do you want?"

"Mn~ strawberry then."

Both of them sit side by side on a bench that's somewhat far away from the shop.

"Mu, mn, this is really nice!"

"Yeah. This is the first time I'm eating crepes, and I find it nice too."

Charlotte was a little depressed that she didn't get to buy the legendary mixed berry flavor, but the softness and flavor of the crepe made her voice sound even happier.

"Delicious~ we'll come back again. I'll get everyone along!"

"If that's the case, I want to get Ichika along."

"Tha-That's cheating! Really!"

But after seeing that Laura could be honest with her own feelings, Charlotte felt somewhat envious.

(I-If-If I could come along with Ichika as well, I would be really happy too...)

Charlotte couldn't help but remember the dream sequence last week—of course, it wasn't something that could be said easily—and couldn't help but blush.

It wasn't directed at anyone, but recalling these ambiguous feelings made Charlotte eat the crepes really quickly.

(Uu~ it's a dream, a dream! That's not really, a~uu~... forget it, forget it, forget it!)

"Charlotte."

"Mn? What is it, Laura—"

Without warning, Laura licked Charlotte's lips lightly.

"WHA-WHAT WERE YOU DODODODODODOODO...!?"

"You have sauce on your face."

"So-SoSo-SoSoSoSoSowhat, huhhuhhuhHUUUH?"

"My hands are full."

Saying that Laura, raised the crepes in her left hand and the bags in the right hand for Charlotte to see.

"The-Then you could have told me—"

"But it looked like it was about to fall off."

Actually, there wasn't really any significance. Laura tilted her head, not knowing what Charlotte was being all panicky about.

Right now, she looked like a cat who'd do anything it wants as she easily went past the barriers the human heart would have...or that's the impression Charlotte had .

"Ah."

Laura licked her shoulder again like a cat combing its own fur.

"~!"

This sudden action caused Charlotte's heart to pound like crazy.

This wasn't a question of whether she liked someone of the same gender. If there was such a pretty girl of the same age being this intimate with her, anyone's heart would pound wildly once or twice.

(Uuu~ Laura just didn't realize her own actions and appearance. That's why she lacked such awareness..)

Though she was thinking about this and grumbling, Charlotte was a pretty girl as well, but humans just couldn't understand themselves.

"Don't be so angry. I'll share some of my crepes with you."

"I-Itadakimasu."

Trying to hide her own embarrassment, Charlotte widened her mouth and took a bite out of Laura's crepes.

"Ah, speaking of which, that crepes shop never sold mixed berry flavor."

"Huh?"

"The menu never had it. Besides, the kitchen didn't have a sauce of a similar color."

"Is-Is it true? You saw it really clearly."

"Of course. What'll happen if it's a disguise for a terrorist? If someone ignites a grenade at that distance, our lives will be in danger even if we deploy our ISes quickly."

"...So you were observing like that."

Was she mindful of the rumor too? Laura's really a girl! ... but that didn't seem to be the case as Charlotte lowered her shoulders dejectedly.

"But we can still eat a mixed berry flavor."

"?"

"What flavor's this crepe?"

"What flavor, grape...ah!"

Seeing the smile on Laura's face, Charlotte suddenly had a brainflash.

"Ahh! Strawberry and blueberry!"

"Correct answer!"

Laura took another bite off her crepes.

"—Umm, Laura! Blueberry and grapes are different!"

"But it's like grapes, right? And if I said 'I want the blueberry flavor' you'll find out, Charlotte."

On hearing that...Charlotte remembered. When Laura ordered strawberry and grape, the boss even smiled in an interesting manner.

"I see...'The mixed berry flavor that would be sold out immediately', so that's how the charm goes."

Realizing this, Charlotte nodded her head, and felt embarrassed for thinking that Laura 'lacks awareness as a girl'.

She thought that she knew everything, but she didn't know anything at all. Realizing this, Charlotte blushed again, but the reason was different from before.

(I-I see. So that's how it is...it-it's true that I'll be really happy if I eat a mixed flavor crepe with my boyfriend...)

Charlotte started remembering the things Laura did till here, and the role became that of Ichika's. She then replayed it again, and it wouldn't stop playing for the next few days.

"Speaking of which, summer's about to end."

"Yeah."

Both of them had a common understanding even without saying it out. This year, in summer—no, not just summer . This year would be a very important phase for them. Not just in their youth, but also in their lives. That was what they were thinking now.

Both of them will never ever forget...

The first time they met their first love at the age of 15 —

"Wha-What, is this...?"

"Mn~♪ , kawaii[4B 3]. It really suits you, Laura!"

"Don-Don't hug me! Uu, I can't move like this..."

"Fuufu-, no~ way. Cats are to stay on the knees obediently."

"You-You're a cat too..."

Laura and Charlotte were having a conversation that would make anyone chuckle.

After dinner, the two of them had nothing to do, and after rolling on the bed awhile, Charlotte suggested that they should hurry up and wear the pajamas they bought, and so it ended up like this.

"Are these...really pajamas?"

"Yup, that's right. It's nice to sleep in, right?"

"How-How would I know without sleeping?"

It wasn't unreasonable for Laura to not be suspicious. Though they were really in pajamas, it was a rare type at that.

The bag-shaped clothing covered their bodies, revealing just a face. Also, there were a pair of cat ears on their heads, and there were paw pads on their hands and feet.

--In other words, these were kitty pajamas.

"It-It's better to sleep naked. That's a lot easier."

"No~ and it suits you. It's a waste if you take it off!"

Right now, both of them were dressed like that. Laura was in the black kitty pajamas, and Charlotte in the white . And ever since they changed into pajamas, Charlotte had been hugging Laura from behind, letting Laura sit on her own knees. It seemed that she really liked this get-up.

"Now Laura, since it's a rare chance, how about a little nya~n~?"

"I-I refuse! Why must I do that?"

"Huh—because it's cute~. Cuteness takes precedence~"

Charlotte smiled with what sounded like laughter, and to Laura, that was a powerful enemy she had never met before.

Anyway, she continued to be coerced with things like ' It's cute so it doesn't matter', 'Why can we not wear this', ' Too bad I have to reject your request', and with these unreasonable, illogical, baseless things that were 180 degrees different from usual, Laura found herself being hugged by Charlotte on the knees the moment she recovered.

"Hurry up, hurry up and try it~ nya~n~♪"

"Ny-Nya~n~"

Though she was shy, Laura the black cat with the eyepatch raised her hand out like that, causing Charlotte to be really happy. Maybe this could rival the data of a certain space battleship main cannon.[4B 4]

"Laura's so cute~. Let's have a photo! Okay? Okay!"

"You-You want to keep a record? I refuse!"

"Don't say that~"

KOK KOK!

"Come in~"

Charlotte responded with an intimate tone only the girls dorm would have, and the radiant smile caused Laura to blush.

"Hai! Oh, you're dressed quite differently. Black and white cats."

The one who entered the room was Ichika.

(EEHHHHHHHHH!!? DID-DID HE SUDDENLY ENTER THIS ROOM? WHY DID IT END UP LIKE

THAT? SPEAKING OF WHICH, WHY TODAY!? AHHH , I'M STILL DRESSED IN CAT PAJAMAS! NO-NO, I-I BOUGHT THIS BECAUSE I FELT THAT IT WAS CUTE. I-I WOULD WEAR SOMETHING MORE MATURE NORMALLY, RIGHT!? NO, THAT'S NOT IT!!)

Charlotte's mind was spinning rapidly. Even though she intended to try and explain, what she ended up saying were ambiguous sounds like 'ah, huh, uu...'.

"It seemed that you called me today. Sorry that I couldn't pick up the phone that time, but it was an urgent case related to IS, so I couldn't call the outside world. I still couldn't contact you after I returned back in the evening, so I just came along to look."

"I-I case. Mn, you're really attentive as a bride. That's worth praising."

Using the opportunity while Charlotte was panicking, Laura got away from her arms, folded her arms in front of her chest and stood up as she said that, but without the usual intimidating presence.

Besides, Laura was dressed in black cat pajamas with cat ears and cat paws. More than intimidating, it made her twice as cute.

"It-It seems that I turned my phone to silent and left it in the bag. Ah-Ahaha."

Having regained some sense somewhat, Charlotte took out her phone and said that.

But she was also dressed in white cat pajamas with cat ears and cat paws. As the scene in front of him was really unbelievable, even Ichika was worrying about where he should focus on.

"Fuu."

(WAAHHH!! I GOT LAUGHED AT~!! WAHHH!! HE MUST BE THINKING THAT I'M REALLY CHILDISH... UUUUUU~)

"Erm, how should I put it. You two look interesting, and very cute."

Perhaps seeing that both of them were giggling, Ichika looked happy as he said that.

""Cu-Cute...""

Laura and Charlotte muttered in unison.

And then they blushed. They continued to remember and replay what Ichika said as they silently sat on the bed.

"Oh yeah, I just went out today, so I got gifts for you."

Saying that, Ichika pulled out a cookie bag with a large @Cruise symbol on it.

""!?""

Both of them remembered how they looked when they were working and started dripping cold sweat.

(Wer-Were we seen by Ichika? At a time when I wasn't like a girl at all!)

(W-Wa-Was I seen!? When I was in that fluttery dress!?)

Ichika's words became lost to them, as both of them covered their faces because they remembered their work today. They even thought of going crazy.

"Also, when I went to that @Cruise shop, there were a bunch of police and media, so I went in thinking that it was something. Then I saw that lively female shopkeeper

giving cookies to the customers involved in the incident. She probably thought that I was one of them and gave one bag to me. I wanted to clarify, but she disappeared. It seemed that she was running around, saying that the main office would come over to investigate or something like that. It's strange, isn't it?"

"Uu, yeah, that-that's right?"

"What-What incident?"

Laura's secretly praying that he may have went to another shop. It was her last hope, but it didn't happen.

"There were bank robbers, I guess. It's been really messy recently."

""..""

"Then, I heard the reporters saying that some bishoujo maid and bishounen butler dealt with it smoothly. It really felt like something that would happen in movies or serials."

"That-That's right."

"Ye-Yeah."

"But since they're so great, I really want to see them..."

Both of them jumped on hearing his words. Maybe they thought too much, but they did feel that the cat ears on their pajamas straightened as well.

(Uu...but I knew I should have put on that maid outfit...)

(But I don't have the guts to say that it's us...)

Both of them harbored such thoughts, and missed the chance to admit it.

"I'll brew tea. Want some cookies?"

Saying that, Ichika walked towards the simple kitchen in the room.

"Ah, no need! I'll prepare it, just sit down, Ichika."

"Hm? But your hands can't do it now, right?"

On hearing Ichika's words, Charlotte and Laura realized that they're still wearing cat paws.

"These are cocoa cookies. And now that we have two kittens, want some hot milk?"

"Huh, ah, yeah!"

"We-We'll leave it to you then."

Both of them blushed as they were called 'kittens', and could only blush and nod their heads.

"The-Then, Ichika, are these clothes, cute?"

Charlotte couldn't help but ask, and even after asking, she couldn't help but fiddle with her fingers nervously.

"Yeah, I find them cute. One black and one white made it cuter. It really matches you two."

"I-I see. Ehehe, it suits me, ha, ufufu."

"Since, since you say so...then, it's not a bad thing to wear this once in a while."

Both of them were embarrassed and excited. Soon, Ichika quickly served up the hot milk and cookies.

It was a summer night, but they were drinking hot milk. The trio held a secret tea party.

An inexplicable tea party with a black cat, a white cat, and a prince.

Chapter 3: A Midsummer Night's Dream

(It hasn't changed at all.....)

August, it's the O-bon festival holiday. During this weekend, I —— Shinonono Houki —— have come to a certain shrine.

A certain shrine——in fact, it's.....the Shinonono shrine, and it was where I lived before I transferred, and also where I was born.

(It really hasn't changed.)

The wooden planks in the kendo dojo are the same as in the past. From the information I had received, it was someone who had retired from police who opened that kendo dojo with good intentions.

That same person said to the kids 'Kendo starts with a ritual, and ends with a ritual', and so asked them to keep the equipment and the dojo in a good state, and it was a really good thought.

(Now, there are more and more people in the dojo, not like in the past, when there were only me, Chifuyu-nee and Ichika.)

Houki looked at the wooden doorplate, and began to immerse herself in her memories.

"I will definitely win today!"

"Fuun!"

"Daaaaahh!"

Bing! *Bang!*

"T-Tomorrow I'll definitely win!"

"Fuun! I don't know when the day you win will come!"

.....

(No, wait, was I such an annoying brat? Also, do I only have memories concerning kendo? Don't I have some kind of better memories.....)

Even if she thought about it over and over, she still couldn't find those kind of memories.

(It-It's impossible, after all my memories can't all concern kendo, it.....is unlikely.)

Houki took out her student handbook, and took out a picture inserted in it.

In the picture Ichika and Houki were wearing a kendo uniform——it was a picture full of memories.

——In fact beside Houki, there was also Tabane, and on Ichika's side was Chifuyu, but Houki folded the two sides of the picture, leaving them covered.

In fact Rin too had folded her picture into a two-people picture. Ichika's childhood friends are alike in some weird facets.

"Houki-chan, so you're here!"

"Y-Yes?"

With her voice suddenly going an octave higher, Houki immediately hid her student handbook behind her, and turned her head.

In front of her was a woman in her 40s, near 50, who had a calm temperament conforming to her age, and her face showed a warm smile.

"Since I've been missing this place, I've returned. I'm sorry, aunt Yukiko."

"Ara, it's fine, after all you've lived here before, anyone else would like to come back to pay a visit."

Her face was showing a sincere smile——it was an expression of pure happiness.

Houki had never been scolded by her aunt. Even if she did something wrong, her aunt still wouldn't scold her.

"Then, you should know what you did wrong, don't you? Then it's fine just like that."

Whenever her aunt simply said that, Houki would feel ashamed.

After learning how to change her bad points by herself , Houki became someone who didn't need to be pampered.

"By the way, is it really OK? For you to come to prepare for this summer's festival."

"Would, would that give you trouble?"

"Of course not, I'm very happy to welcome you! But Houki-chan, you hardly get vacations, don't you have some boy you want to date?"

"Th-That....."

Houki suddenly blushed, and Ichika's silhouette naturally surged in her head.

Seeing her reaction, aunt Yukiko seemed to know the answer to that and laughed a bit.

"Then, since you've already come here, I won't go easy on you! At 6 o'clock you'll have to do the Kagura dance,[4C 1] so please go and wash yourself first."

"Yes!"

The O-Bon festival in the Shinonono shrine, if you classify the strictness, then it'd be Shinto, though it was more for the Earth god's heritage. That was why, not only in the New Year, but also during the O-Bon festival that the Kagura dance must be performed. [4C 2]

That kind of dance is to worship the spirits who return to this world as well as the gods who take them here, and

at the same time it's also the reason why the 'Shinonono school' evolved into swordsmanship in the past.

Though the exact historical records had disappeared because of the wars, and the cause wasn't clear, but it seemed that there were women who could use swords in this shrine, and moreover, in the end, it was a place of ' ancient lore'.

After Houki moved, her relatives also took over the management like this.

(It hasn't changed at all.)

Houki, who was in the changing room, started yearning for the place where she lived in the past.

After that, she couldn't help but think of the reason why she left this place.

(If it wasn't that person who invented IS.....)

Had it not been like that, she would have stayed here.

——And she would have stayed with Ichika forever.

"....."

She was showing a stern expression while undressing, and after her hand felt 'that' on her left wrist, she stopped .

'That' was a red ribbon, about a centimeter wide, twisted, and with golden and silver rings in the front, being a perfect pair——that was [Akatsubaki] in its standby mode.

(Though, the one who gave me this.....)

After her little sister asked the first time, her elder sister pleasantly answered her.

Whenever she thought that, she could feel pleasure surging from the bottom of her heart, and forget those hateful memories.

(I.....what the hell am I thinking.....)

Is it to forgive her?

Is it to reject her?

(.....I don't know.....)

I don't know, I really don't know.

Houki felt that maybe the two were right, and the two were wrong.

(.....Anyway, I'll think about her after the bath.)

Before the divine dance, to perfectly purify the body, the river water or the well water should be used, but concerning that point, it's really arbitrary——the people are more like 'So the festival can continue, we can close our eyes on this'.

And for this, the Shinonono shrine's purification, only taking a bath would be fine.

Houki entered the bathroom with only the red bracelet on her.

When Houki was young, the bathroom had been upgraded so it's all made of hinoki cypress, and it wouldn't lose to the hot springs during the seaside school last month.

Though she doesn't know how spacious is the inn's bath, but at least, four people can extend their legs in the bath.

"Huaa....."

Immersing herself in the bath she hasn't used for years, she thought that it was just as comfortable as in the past.

The bath's water was just a bit hotter than normal warm water, and it suited Houki's taste.

When she extended her body in the water, small splashing sounds were made, and she felt very comfortable.

(As I thought, a bath is really the best.....)

The hot water ran over her delicate skin, with feelings of comfort and gentleness running over her body.

As she was going to happily accept these sensations, she suddenly thought of the things that happened last month.

"....."

The time that she spent with Ichika on the seashore, at night.

While thinking that their lips had almost met, her fingertips slightly touched her own.

(Had it continued like that.....)

They would have kissed——for sure.

"....."

And as if she wanted to hide the fact that she was blushing, Houki plunged in the bath, with the water arriving to the level of her lips.

After that, since she couldn't bear the feelings of joy, which couldn't be expressed into words, surging from the depth of her heart, the sighs she was making, like that, became bubbles in the bath.

(Th-That, does it mean, that it's like this? I-Is it really like this? I-I-Ichika also loves me, so-so-so it means, that both of us are in love with each other.....AAAHHHH!)

Even her ears and her forehead became completely red , and Houki created many bubbles around her neck.

After that, for maybe a minute or two, maybe even ten minutes after that, she was in that state. Suddenly, she surged out of the water because she didn't have oxygen remaining in her, and stood up.

"Aaaaaahhhh!"

She was happy and embarrassed, but.....she really loves him.

These feelings in her heart continuously flowed, and made Houki show an unexplainable angry face. Of course, her cheeks weren't red due to the hot water, but due to other matters.

(N-No! I'll act as normal, as if nothing happened, today my job is to act as a shrine maiden, I must delete the distractions in my mind.)

And again, she got back into the water, and began making bubbles again.

"....."

After that, it had actually been fifty minutes later that Houki left the bath.

"Come, it's good, now like this, the preparations are finished."

Wearing the white shirt and dress that were used for the dance, the Houki with golden ornaments looked way more mature than usual; like that, her body was emitting a mysterious aura, and she was beautiful enough to make people hold their breath.

"Can you use the rouge by yourself?"

"Yes, I can, I've already used it before."

"Ah, right, Houki-chan has danced the divine dance since she was young. Hnn~~you were cute at that time too."

"For w-what happened before....."

"Oh, haha, I'm really sorry, it's always like that when you are older."

To cover her face which had an embarrassed expression, Houki used the fingertip of her little finger to

take a bit of rouge on a plate and color her lips. To not use the lipstick nowadays, but instead using the rouge like in the past, is also this shrine's habit.

(.....OK.)

After checking on her mirror whether she had put the rouge well, Houki was satisfied.

She thought that back then, no matter what her mother would do, she stubbornly wanted to do the divine dance.

Though it was really embarrassing, but compared to this, she would rather concentrate herself on the image of her that the mirror was reflecting.

(Aunt Yukiko's make-up skills are really good, the one the mirror is reflecting really looks like someone else. It looks almost like――)

A princess from somewhere.

When that word came into her mind, Houki's cheeks turned red again.

(Re-Recently, it seems that I've been getting too ahead of myself...)

And she knew the reason behind it.

"..."

Houki coughed slightly for a bit to make her expression look stern again.

Seeing Houki like this, aunty took the sacred sword from the altar.

"Speaking of which, Houki-chan. You never took this alone. Just the fan, right?"

"I-I can handle it now!"

And like what Houki said, she immediately pulled the sword out from the sheath. She wielded the sword with her right hand, and the fan with the left hand.

This sword and fan combination originated from the move 'One sword one flash'[4C 3], and even till now, it's one of the signature moves of the Shinonono sword style.

Even so, this doesn't mean that a fan must be used. The weapon in the left hand must 'Receive', 'Sink' and ' Manipulate', while the right hand must 'Cut', 'Sever' and '

Penetrate'. In other words, it's more like a defensive ' nitoryuu' style. In other styles, it's also called a 'Grove nitoryuu'.[4C 4]

"Swing the fan for me, Houki-chan. Aunty only saw you swing it when you were young."

"Ah, okay. I'll treat it as a little practice then."

Houki sheathed the sword back and put it at her belt. The way she did it looked like a samurai sheathing his sword instead of a divine dance. But this would be an accurate description, since she is of the Shinonono line after all.

"I'm starting."

Houki flipped out the fan that was folded up.

The bells on each end of the fan gave a ring, *shiian*...a solemn tone.

It's now practice, but Houki, who's doing the divine dance, gave an aura that feels like she was on stage, seemingly making everyone around her calm down.

She swayed the fan left and right, squatted down halfway before drawing the sacred sword.

Then, the blade of the sword followed the fan as it slashed the air.

Right now, she looked like a real 'Sword Miko' that possessed dignity and calmness, and Houki, who got a lot more prettier than when she was young, naturally gave such a presence.

"...That's it for practice."

"Well! Well well well! Amazing, Houki-chan! You practiced often after you left here, right?"

"Huh, yeeah...sort of...well, I am a miko after all..."

Seeing her aunt smile happily like this, Houki looked embarrassed as she said that.

But she would definitely not tell Ichika about this.

Houki had some bad memories about doing childish things.

(I got laughed at by guys before...)

At that time, Ichika looked really dashing when he stepped up. Though the first impression he gave was rather poor, after that incident, Houki had a better view of Ichika's attitude.

So she didn't want Ichika to know.

In the past, Ichika was angry because 'So many boys ganged up on a girl', and not because that 'Houki got humiliated'.

If Ichika said to her 'You're not suited to do feminine things', it wouldn't just be a mental trauma.

In the worst case scenario, she may end up crying on scene—

Thinking about this, Houki felt that she must not let Ichika see her perform the divine dance, so she didn't invite him along.

(Besides, that guy's always like that. He won't come here even if he remembers that it's the summer festival today. He'll definitely feel that it's troublesome or something and stay around at home.)

Thinking about this, Houki realized that she wasn't interested now.

(Ar-Arghhh! Anyway! Ichika won't come here! So I just need to focus on the dance!)

"Yo."

"..."

"You've been working hard."

Ichika, he's here.

(WAIWAIWAIWAI**WAIT A MINUTE!** THAT'S WEIRD! WAY TOO WEIRD! WHY DID ICHIKA APPEAR HERE AFTER I FINISHED THE DIVINE DANCE AND CHANGED INTO THE MIKO OUTFIT TO SEAL THE SHRINE'S CHARMS!?)

As her mind was in too much of a mess, Houki tried to replay what she did in the past few minutes again and again in a very dazed manner, and then checked the current situation again.

"Speaking of which, you're amazing. I was shocked to see you like that."

(Am I dreaming? Something impossible just happened. Maybe I'm just dreaming.)

"And, also...very pretty."

"WH--!?"

Houki immediately blushed, and her face was so red that it wouldn't to lose the red hakama.

(U-U-UUU!? I-I-I WAS JUST DREAMING! THA-THAT ICHIKA WOULD-WOULDN'T SAY SUCH THINGS TO ME! THAT'S RIGHT, IT MUST BE LIKE THAT! IT'S JUST A DREAM, JUST A DREAM!)

"THIS MUST BE A DREAM!"

"Wha-What's wrong?"

Shocked by the sudden raising of voice, Ichika asked back in a somewhat weak manner.

"THIS MUST BE A DREAM. I'M DEFINITELY DREAMING! HURRY UP AND WAKE UP!"

"What's wrong, Houki-chan? Why are you so loud? What just happened...oh my?"

Noticing that something's amiss, aunt Yukiko came over to look at Houki and Ichika.

"Oh my."

PAN! Seemingly thinking of something, aunt Yukiko clapped once, and there seemed to be a light bulb above the head.

"I can settle the things here, Houki-chan. Hurry up and go to the summer festival."

"What!? ...uu, as expected of a dream, things that are impossible just continued to happen. If that's the case..."

Houki continued to mutter as she still seemed to be thinking that she's dreaming. Seeing Houki like this, a light bulb appeared above aunt Yukiko's head.

"Eih!"

PAK!

In contrast to her usual gentleness, aunt Yukiko swung a sharp karate chop.

"OUCH!!?"

"Houki-chan, hurry up and return back to reality."

"Huh..."

The brain that was hit caused Houki to recover.

Then, aunt Yukiko turned Houki to the right side and pushed her out.

"Okay, okay, move faster. Go take a shower to wipe the sweat off. Auntie here will take out the yukata for you during that time."

"Th-Tha-That..."

"Okay okay, hurry up!"

Auntie didn't want to let Houki have a chance to talk as she pushed her back to the main house. As they left, she even said to Ichika,

"You must wait for her. It's a boyfriend's job to wait for his girlfriend."

"Huh?"

Ichika was momentarily stunned, but aunt just blinked at him and brought Houki into the house.

He didn't know what was going on, but since she wanted him to wait, Ichika could only wait.

(Th-Tha-That's impossible!)

SPLASH! After letting the hot water drip down her head for the third time, Houki repeated what she said.

(Ichika came to the summer festival. There's was a possibility...and-and-and also!)

Splash, Houki washed herself a 4th time.

The wet black hair continued to drip, but she didn't mind.

(Th-Tha-That Ichika-that Ichika actually-that Ichika actually, called-called me 'Pretty'...)

Right now, Ichika, who had been beautified four times in Houki's mind, softly said.

"You're so pretty, Houki..."

"Ho-Hold it, Ichika! Did-Didn't you come here to see the fireworks? Why-Why are you always looking at me... "

"That's because I want an excuse to be along with you."

"I-Ichika..."

"Houki..."

And then, their lips slowly touched each other—

"KYAAHHHH!!"

SPLASH! She again drenched another full bucket of water on herself.

"Houki-chan? I seemed to hear a scream. Are you alright?"

"I-I'm okay! I'm alright!"

Houki said such a lie without thinking, but she didn't look alright at all.

"Any-Anyway, you should be done, right? It's been past 30 minutes."

"Huuh!?"

Completely forgetting about the time, Houki frantically washed her hair and body to clear off the sweat.

After bathing, she immediately used the hairdryer to dry her hair. Aunt made things faster by putting the yukata on Houki without allowing her to refuse, and she could only let her aunt do that.

"Mn, okay, Houki-san's really suited to wear a yukata~ because you have hair comparable to your mom."

"Tha-Thanks..."

Houki thanked her aunt for putting on the yukata and praising her, but the fact that she was wearing something different from usual made her unable to hide her panic.

Actually, Houki hadn't worn a yukata in many years, but the presence and completeness she gave was comparable to the models in magazines, even displaying her own personal style.

(It-It suits...me well...I guess! At-At least I don't look weird wearing it, right?)

Having no confidence in her own looks, Houki said that as she looked at the mirror.

The red goldfish that was swimming about leisurely was printed on the white-based yukata with light blue patterns on it, and the silver pearls and gold patterns weren't too much. They matched each other really well, creating a clear balance and presence of dignity.

"Then, bring this along. You can put your purse, handphone and other important stuff inside."

Saying that, her aunt passed a little bag to her.

When did she prepare that...Thinking about it, Houki decided not to think about it even further. Aunt Yukiko has always been such an intelligent person. She would always prepare things for anything.

"Th-Then, aunt Yukiko."

"What is it?"

"Than-Thank you..."

Seeing Houki say this shyly, aunt showed a really mystified look, and then responded with a radiant smile.

"No problems. More importantly, here, don't keep your boyfriend waiting."

"No, that's not it. Well, about that—"

"Okay okay, hurry up."

She got prompted out of the corridor by her aunt and walked down the corridor. On the way, she looked up at the clock hanging on the wall, and found that it was already past 6pm. The outside was already darkened by the orangey-red sky.

"The fireworks will start at 8. Find a place where both of you can be alone."

"So-So I say...he's not—"

"Okay~ be careful on the way~"

"Uu..."

Even though Houki wanted to say something to her aunt who didn't want to hear her explanation, she was forced to wear the wooden sandals and had to go out of the house. She didn't have any room to argue back.

Besides, she was most mindful about Ichika who ended up waiting for an hour.

(Wha-What should I do? I spent a longer time than expected. Did Ichika go home already? And aunt even got mistaken...ahh, what should I do!?)

Houki took care not to mess up the bottom of her skirt as she hurriedly rushed to the bird gate. In the past, when they said that they would meet up, it would be over there.

(Where's Ichika...)

Having reached the tori gate, Houki found that it was hard to find Ichika as there was a lot of people gathered there.

Besides, almost everyone would go through the tori gate to the shrine, so even if she stood there, she would feel that she was blocking everyone.

(So Ichika really went back...)

Just when Houki thought of that, someone grabbed her hand.

"You're so slow, Houki. I was getting impatient—oh? You're dressed in a yukata."

"I-I-Ichika! Where were you!? I didn't notice you at all! "

The second unexpected meeting made Houki overly nervous as she couldn't express her words properly.

(Ca-Calm down, calm down a bit...ahh!? My hand! He's holding onto my hand...!?)

It was only now that she realized that Ichika was holding onto her hand tightly, and her face immediately reddened.

Luckily, the surroundings got a bit dark, so Ichika didn't notice her blushing.

"Ohh~ that's not bad. This attire suits you."

"Re-Really? I-I-I think so too!"

—I-I got praised!? Did I get praised again?

Dragging along Houki who was drowning in the praises and feeling somewhat fearful, Ichika continued to head through the crowd.

"Then let's go walk around. Also—speaking of which, I haven't been to the summer festival in two years. Last year, I was preparing for my exams."

"..."

Houki placed her left hand in front of her chest to try and check & control the beating of her heart as she followed Ichika from behind. Her right hand was still being held.

"Cotton candy, yakisoba, grilled corn. This place has everything. As expected of the Shinonono shrine."

She didn't know what Ichika meant by that, but right now, Houki almost couldn't hear it.

Right now, Houki was only worried about whether Ichika could hear her heartbeat or not.

"Houki?"

"Wha-What?"

Ichika thought that Houki couldn't hear his words because there were so many people in the crowd, so he brought his face closer to Houki.

At that moment, Houki remembered the moment when they were at the seaside last month in the middle of the night. They didn't kiss, so she frantically pulled her distance this time.

Right now, Ichika looked completely the same as when she peeked and saw him.

"Hey, don't move around. You'll knock into others."

"Uu, okay, sorry."

"Alright, where do you want to go?"

"We-Wel-Well..."

After avoiding the people, the hand that was released now felt really anxious.

However, Houki couldn't say that she wanted to hold hands, and the fingers that were hidden behind could only move about anxiously.

(Bu-But, we're alone now. It's different from school. We're alone. Y-Yeah!)

Thinking about this, she immediately felt happy about the current situation, and yet couldn't get rid of the loneliness of being unable to hold hands.

"Speaking of which, Houki, you really couldn't catch goldfish."

"That-That was the past! The past!"

"Mn? You're different now?"

"Of course! Don't think that I'll always be the same as before!"

"Then let's have a match, shall we? The loser will have to treat."

"No problem. Fine by me!"

Folding their arms and nodding in agreement, Houki and Ichika went to look for a goldfish scooping stall.

After walking for a while, both of them reached their destination and tried out for one scoop

"Ah, but Houki, you're in a yukata. Is it okay?"

"I'm used to wearing a yukata already. No need to go easy on me."

"Is that so...then, a showdown!"

"Fine by me!"

Both of them dipped their nets into the water at the same time.

"Sorry to make you treat me with yakisoba."

Even though Ichika was eating the yakisoba happily, beside him, Houki clenched her fist unhappily.

Houki thought that both of them would be tied at 3-all, but one of the goldfish jumped back into the fish tank.

Both of them got attracted by the movements of the goldfish, and the net broke at the same time, so the winner was decided then.

"That damned goldfish...jumped back into the water while I was serious..."

"Just the goldfish?"

After a staredown with twice the intensity, Ichika could only shut up.

"Oh well, you don't have to be so angry. Here, the yakisoba's nice. Have some of it, Houki."

After saying that, Ichika passed the chopsticks with noodles on it to her.

(Is-Is-Is this the so-called...indirect kiss...)

Her heart beating wildly again, Houki was cautious not to let her feelings show on her face as she looked at Ichika's expression.

"Hm?"

However, the person himself didn't seem too different from usual. It probably didn't mean anything else.

Even though she's unhappy about this, Houki still felt happy about the gentleness Ichika naturally showed. She looked down in a somewhat shy manner, opened her mouth only when Ichika reminded her with a 'Here, ahh', and ate the noodles on the chopsticks.

"Mn, uu, it-it's better than I thought..."

"Didn't I say so? Besides, you're hungry, aren't you? You were even doing the divine dance just now."

"Uu, mn, tha-that, that's right...I guess..."

In fact, had Ichika not reminded her, she would have forgotten that she was hungry.

But even in such a state, she still nodded her head, because she didn't want to talk too much and end the natural 'Here, ahh' Ichika had said.

(But it seems that this guy will do that to anyone.)

Thinking about this, Houki suddenly felt some pain in her chest.

—I really wish that he would specially do such a thing for me—

Houki couldn't help but think this. This is a 16-year-old girl who fell into the net of love.

"My-My mouth feels a little thirsty."

"You're right—you're feeling hot because of the crowd, right? Can't be helped then. Let's go buy something to drink."

"Uu, mn."

Though she was blushing because of a completely different reason, Houki still nodded her head.

(O-Okay, I'll just hold his hand naturally like that—)

Having a serious gaze as though she was about to draw a sword in a showdown, Houki stared at Ichika's hand.

Then, the perfect opportunity arrived.

(No-Now-Now's the time—!)

"—Huh? Ichika...san?"

"Oh?"

Ichika turned around suddenly due to the call, and Houki's hand missed.

However, as she didn't want to let others see herself being embarrassed like this, Houki raised her hand that didn't reach the target and acted like she was tidying her hair.

(Ahhh, really! Who did that? Who interrupted us!)

"Oh, it's Ran."

(...U, uu? Who's that?)

It's to be expected that she didn't know the person, but the fact that a girl she didn't know yet Ichika knew of suddenly appeared made Houki really mindful.

"Such-Such a coincidence..."

"Yeah. I thought that I wouldn't meet anyone familiar here too. What a coincidence. Where's Dan?"

"Who-Who knows? Maybe he's sleeping at home?"

Thinking about this, Ran seemed to be in a similar yukata getup as Houki. She wasn't in her usual ponytail, instead, she had a complicated hairstyle that was tied and swept behind.

"Oh, this is the first time I'm seeing you in a yukata, Ran! Though I only had an impression of you in a dress, the yukata suits you too."

"Is-Is-Is that so? Tha-Thank you for the praise..."

Trying to hide her blushing face, Ran lowered her head slightly.

From this, Houki's alert radar immediately raised into alert status as she noticed the girl's affections for Ichika.

"Ahh—Prez is embarrassed—. That's so rare—"

"I see! So Prez wouldn't even go out with boys from other schools and girls from our school because of this?"

"Do your best, Prez♪"

A group of girls in yukata standing behind Ran exclaimed.

"You-You-You people!"

"KYA~ Prez is angry~"

"We just touched the fangs~"

"That's so scary~"

Seeing the girls with her joking around, Ran took a deep breath and wanted to scold them, but Ichika took the first words.

"They're your friends from school?"

"Huh, yeeah, they're, student council members..."

Unknowingly, Ichika went beside Ran, and this distance made her jump, and she even stuttered.

The four girls laughed at Ran for being like this and then continued talking to continue her words.

"We're here today to get inspiration for the school autumn festival."

"Since it's a learning festival, we have to come here ourselves!"

"But I guess it's time for us to go back!"

"Huh? Why are you deciding—"

Ran widened her eyes because she heard that for the first time. This is to be expected, because these teenage girls decided to use the legendary eye contact.

"Bye Prez!"

"We're going off!"

"See you at school!"

"Adiós!"

"Huh? Ah, hey, wait a—"

With quick footsteps, the four girls moved away really fast as if they weren't in yukatas and quickly vanished into the crowd.

Ran, who reached her hand out at the 4 who quickly left, left it in mid-air, and she was left alone with Ichika beside her and Houki, whose mood just seemed to have gotten worse.

"Huh, umm, well, those girls, they just like to joke around."

"Ah, I can understand somewhat."

"They-They're not bad girls. They don't have any ill intentions, you know?"

Ran, who was trying to defend herself with overt passion, found that her body was too close to Ichika.

"So-Sorry!"

Ran immediately backed away from Ichika and turned right. Her face was a lot redder than before.

"Ah—ahem!"

Houki deliberately coughed to remind Ichika, probably unable to deal with their world.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot to introduce. Umm~ she's Gotanda Ran. Do you remember the time I talked to you about Dan? Ran's his little sister."

"I'm Gotanda Ran."

Ran greeted Houki formally. From her attitude, Houki immediately realized that she was her enemy in love.

"And she's Shinonono Houki, my first childhood friend. I told you of her before, right?"

"Nope, you only told me the name."

"I see. Oh well, please take care of each other. Hey, Houki."

"I'm Shi-Shinonono Houki. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too."

Both of them formally greeted each other again, and then maintained a few seconds of silence.

During that time, both of them were thinking—

(I heard that Ichika-san spoke before of some samurai or some bushido...but-but he never said that she was so pretty. And, and also, those breasts are big...it feels sneaky...that's cheating...)

(That damned Ichika! Lying to me that he's not really familiar with his friend's sister...she's interested in you, right? And also...she's cute in ways different from me... uu, I'm so angry!)

Then, both of them looked at him, expecting Ichika to say something.

"..."

"..."

Ichika looked somewhat embarrassed by their serious looks.

"Wha-What?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing."

Even though both of them answered so briefly, their sharp looks didn't soften any bit.

"Oh."

PA! Ichika suddenly clapped. The two people who didn't manage to get his next sentence sharpened their eyes.

"Want to go out together?"

It defied all expectations, but it's an expected answer for a blockhead, and that caused Houki to lower her head dejectedly.

On the other hand, Ran was delighted by Ichika's unexpected answer.

"You see, since Ran's friends went home...ah, Ran, you aren't going home yet?"

"Not-Not that! Okay, please allow me to go out with you!"

Ran forcefully grabbed Ichika's hand, making Ichika look somewhat mystified. Ran realized from his expression that she was really bold, and blushed as she released her hand.

"Let's walk around then."

"Okay."

"Ahh..."

In contrast to the delighted Ran, Houki made a very dejected response unhappily.

Ichika was in the middle, Houki on the left and Ran on the right, as they walked together. In the bustling summer festival, most of them are family members being together, friends being together and also lovers holding hands together.

(Thi-This is a good chance...! It's a good chance to get near Ichika-san! And that idiot brother's not around! But, but my rival's somewhat strong—un! I'll do my best!)

Ran glanced at Ichika's face as she secretly gave herself a victory pose to motivate herself.

(Uu—...I really want to get used to Ichika's blockheadedness, but at this point...as expected, he would praise other girls in yukata other than me...haa, this infuriates me...)

Thinking about this, Houki couldn't help but be even angrier. And her anxiety started to build up, including her own naive thoughts.

(Bu-But, well, never mind...I-I just got an indirect...ki...ss...anyway. Fufufu♪)

Though this may be just some unknown happiness to outsiders, to the person involved, it's enough that such a little happiness belonged to her.

Houki cupped her hands together as it seemed that she wanted to keep those memories.

"Speaking of which, Ran, you often came along with Dan, right?"

"Huh, yeah, sorta. My dad often said that it would be dangerous for girls to go out on their own, so he didn't allow me to go out freely."

—But it's because of that that I could mingle with Ichika-san.

Ran slightly muttered.

Only she could hear that voice in her heart. Deep inside her heart, Ran felt that that day was the anniversary of her first crush. The gentle, happy and warm feeling gradually spread through her chest.

(I may be able to be a little bolder today...)

I must do my best today! With those words, Ran reached out for Ichika's hand.

—*DONK*

"KYAH!?"

"Ah, sorry!"

"No, it's okay. It was my fault for not watching the road."

Having knocked into a passer-by, Ran lowered her head and apologized.

"Are you okay, Ran?"

"Ah..."

Ichika naturally pulled Ran, who lost her balance, into his chest.

She was in the chest of someone she likes. More delicate than Mozart's piano theme and more exciting than Vivaldi's Concerto, this was too sudden for a teenage girl.

"Huh, uu, ah...!"

Even though her arms were flailing meaninglessly, Ran couldn't do anything as she could only let her girl instincts run wild.

"Hm?"

"Ah, ah—it's that!"

Ran randomly pointed at the shooting shop...but that was done to prevent her thoughts from being revealed.

"Oh? Are you good with that?"

"Huh, mmn sort of."

Trying to prevent her quickening heartbeat from being discovered, Ran pretended to tidy her yukata and pulled her distance from Ichika.

(Ahh, did-did I just embarrass myself? U-Uu... Ichika-san's body's really sturdy—THAT'S NOT IT! WE-WE'RE-WE'RE GOING TO PLAY SHOOTING! I MUST DO MY BEST!)

"We're going then...hm? Houki? You'll get lost if you're so far away. Here."

Saying that, Ichika held Houki and Ran's hand at the same time as he headed to the shooting stall.

Most likely, he didn't know the feelings of the girls whose hands he was holding.

"Hello, welcome."

"Uncle, give us a game for three."

"Oh? You're holding flowers on both hands? How envious. Okay, no discount then!"

"Huuh? Don't say that. Give me a discount! At least to the girls."

"Gahahahah. I humbly refuse."

The boss of the shooting stall gave such a casual smile as he said that. He had a white T-shirt over his tanned body, and the muscles on his arms and shoulders could be seen. Ichika felt that he was nice, and so paid for all three of them.

"Thanks...oh, kid, you have some attitude there. Brats nowadays hardly pay for the girls."

"Yeah! So give me a discount—"

"I refuse. A popular guy's an enemy of all men! Gahahaha!!!"

Though the boss looked like a nice guy, there didn't seem to be any room for bargaining. Ichika, Houki and Ran received a pistol each, loaded the cork bullets, and readied them.

"..."

Like a sniper, Ran stared seriously at the target. Right now, she was hard to approach, much like a switchblade, and it felt that anyone who got near her would be cut.

(...I couldn't shoot well at all...)

Ran regretted that her self-defense mechanism that kicked in immediately a few seconds ago was basically digging her own grave.

"Oh—you look serious. Do your best, Ran!"

"Yes."

Not wanting to be distracted, Ran nodded her head.

(AHHH!! NOT GOOD NOT GOOD! I CAN'T DO THIS WELL AT ALL!)

But the longer it took, Ichika and even the surrounding customers would expect more for her.

(Got to end this now and then say 'Actually, I can't play this well, so please teach me', so let's do this! Yeah, let's do this then! That's the way!)

That's right, maybe there will be body contact when he teaches me. Besides, Ichika-san's grades in IS Academy were brilliant. I saw that on TV. Yup—Yup!

As the colors of pink, grape and fruit started to come up, the cork bullet suddenly shot out.

"Oh."

"Ohh?"

"Ohhh!?"

PAK—PUNNK!!

"You-You hit that metal plate...! The, the LCD TV~!"

"HUH? HUH? HUUUH...?"

It seemed that she subconsciously shot the hardest prize. Everyone, from the boss of the shooting shop to the surrounding customers and Ichika went wild.

"Amazing, Missy! I thought that nobody would be able to hit that—ahh, it's alright."

"Ha-Haa..."

"You made the LCD TV as the target! Amazing! And you even hit it! I'm impressed."

Ichika really looked impressed as he clapped his hands . The surrounding customers started clapping with him, and there was even more people.

"Kahahaha! I made a loss today! Damn it, take it take it ~!"

"Tha-Thanks..."

The packaging wasn't really small, but it wasn't something a middle school girl couldn't take as Ran recevied the prize.

"That's great."

"Really..."

Seeing Ran lower her head dejectedly, Ichika had a '?' above his head.

On the other hand, standing on the other side of Ichika , Houki—

"Uu..."

Having missed 5 straight shots, Houki had no bullets left.

"Houki's as bad a shooter as always."

"SHU-SHUT UP! I-I CAN HIT IT WITH A BOW AND ARROW!"

"No, the prize will break, definitely...really, you need help."

Ichika handed his remaining bullets and even the loaded pistol to Houki.

"Basically, the way you're holding the gun is too weird . You must be like this, put your arms straight, look straight, and make sure the bullet's in the same trajectory —"

"..."

Saying that, Ichika made body contact with Houki. Though Houki looked emotionless, her heart was pounding crazily.

(WAHHH! THA-THAT'S TOO BOLD! H-HI-HIS HAND'S TOUCHING MY BODY!? UU~ HE'S BREATHING ONTO MY FACE...MOVE AWAY...)

—She didn't want Ichika to move away though.

"About that. Hm. How about it, got it?"

"Uu, mn."

"Try shooting then. Aimed carefully?"

"I-I got it!"

Sounding somewhat stronger now, Houki let out an ' Ahh' deep inside as she squeezed the trigger.

PUNNK—Pok!

"Oh! You hit the doll."

That was a head-sized penguin that's somewhat large and could be used as a cushion. The innocent eyes seemed to be protesting that it got shot.

"Oh! You shot good, Missy! Gahahaha, I lost badly today!"

"...I wanted the daruma nearby..."

"Hm?"

"No, nothing."

Even though she said that, Houki received the doll. Even though she was aiming for a different prize, she still gave a happy smile.

"Mn~that Ran's so slow."

"Ye-Yeah."

They continued to walk and play and eat as they went through a lot of stalls.

Right now, it was about 8pm, and the fireworks ceremony was about to start.

"I don't think she would get lost...un."

Ran wasn't with them now, and that was to be expected, since the LCD TV was too large. She called Dan over to pickup the TV, so she was waiting outside the shrine area at the road for him.

Ran mentioned that it would be too much of a hassle to make them come along, so she made them wait at the drinking point at the shrine for a while. However, it didn't seem that she would be coming back anytime soon .

Just when Ichika was considering if he should look for her, the phone rang.

"Ex-Excuse me, is this Ichika-san?"

"Oh, what is it, Ran? You lost your way?"

"No, that's not it!"

"Hahaha, I was joking."

"Mu~"

A pouting could be heard from the other side of the phone as Ran let out a 'cute imouto' feeling. Ichika chuckled.

"Actually...erm, I got caught by my brother."

"Oh, Dan's here? Call him to come over too."

"No, well...he wanted me to go home with him no matter what."

That idiotic brother...Ran added that and sighed deeply.

"Sorry, I had to go because of that."

"I see. Be careful on the way then."

Ichika hung up the phone and walked to Houki who was waiting for him.

"Ran went back first."

"I-I see."

Houki got shocked by her unexpected cry of delight, and felt ashamed of her own attitude.

(This-This is really indecent. I...)

Thinking about this, Houki felt even more ashamed and lowered her head slightly as she played around with her fingers.

"Let's go then."

"Ah..."

Ichika grabbed Houki's hand again and walked to the woods behind the shrine.

(Go-Going somewhere that's empty...don't tell me.)

Of course, it wouldn't be like that. Besides, there's a secret viewing spot behind this woods for them to view the fireworks festival.

In the woods that had high trees all around, a certain area was open like a window.

The spot looked like a picture for the four seasons. In spring, it could be used to see the sunrise. In summer, it could be used to see the fireworks. In autumn, it could be used to view the full moon, and in winter, it could be used to see a snowscape. It was a secret place with the colors of all four seasons. Only Chifuyu, Tabane, Ichika and Houki knew of that place.

"Oh—this place hasn't changed at all."

His words didn't reach Houki's ears.

Rii, *Rii*, the sounds of insects could be heard. A light breeze blew into the woods where humans hardly stayed in, removing the heat of summer.

Being alone with the person she liked in such a place... Houki couldn't remain calm after it ended up like this.

(It-It's just-just me and Ichika...and-and also, the-the... atmosphere, it's rather good...)

Seemingly expecting something, Houki glanced at Ichika, but Ichika just looked at the sky in an excited manner.

(Is-Isn-Isn't this a good-good time to confess!?)

If anyone asked her who she wanted to confess to, she would probably say 'The answer's in my own heart' (Find out my mind).

(Uuu...?)

Houki continued to stare at Ichika as her face gradually reddened, and let out sweat that didn't have anything to do with the heat.

(Sa-Say-Say it! Just say it! it's the time to say it...just say it!)[4C 5]

Repeating the 5 step verb utilization in her mind, Houki forcefully backed away.

Right now, the chibi-Houki[4C 6] in her mind kicked her, and another chibi-Houki kicked the one in front of her, and another chibi-Houki continued to motion...just like that, it continued on.

(I, Me? Must I say it? Do I have to say it? Shouldn't the guy be the one confessing? No, it's that Ichika. He won't say it himself. Speaking of which, I don't know if he likes

me—no! He likes me! He really likes me! Most likely! I guess...)

Realizing that she was repeating the words in her heart, Houki blushed again.

The buzz of the crowds was far away from them, and they couldn't hear anything now.

(Now-Now's the time—!)

Houki finally decided to confess, and said,

"I-Ichika!"

"Hm?"

"I-I-I li—"

DOOOO-------NN!!!

"Ohh! The fireworks started!"

"Ik-Ike--..."

"Hm? What's the matter, Houki?"

"..."

Houki kept the tightly clasped hands behind her body.

……

(Uu...I got interrupted by the fireworks...)

But it couldn't be helped even if she regretted it. It was her own fault for not confessing anyway.

The most famous of this fireworks would be the 100 shots. Once released, the booming sounds and the colors in the night sky would continue for an hour.

(I'll give up today then...haa...)

Thinking about this, she suddenly lost her strength, and the anger she couldn't vent on naturally disappeared .

"OHH~ AMAZING!!"

PA! *PAPA!* With the flash of the fireworks everytime, the light would show the side of Ichika's delighted face.

Seeing such a naive expression, Houki suddenly found herself laughable.

--Right now, just being with him is enough.

Thinking about this, Houki looked up at the sky with Ichika.

Red, blue, green, yellow, the fireworks in the sky continued to dazzle in the sky as most of the viewers enjoyed it.

"So pretty..."

"Mn, so pretty."

Looking up at the sky, Houki did something that was somewhat daring—

She linked her own arm with Ichika's left arm.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"Is it alright?"

"Mn, it's alright."

Ichika just turned to the side for a while, and then his eyes turned to the fireworks in the night sky.

Houki's face was somewhat scarlet red under the fireworks. However, it wasn't because she was shy, but because she was delighted.

The summer memories of a 16-year-old passed by under the dazzling colors of the fireworks—

Chapter 4: A Quintet Causing Trouble in Love

Seeing that doorplate, her heart started to beat furiously.

'Orimura' was written on it. Charlotte read it a few times, and took a deep breath.

(It's OK, it's OK...Ichika said that he'd be at home today, so I won't cause any trouble.)

Charlotte wasn't in the IS Academy's hallways now, but on the street. She hesitantly stared at the intercom below the 'Orimura' doorplate, and the sun's rays relentlessly sprinkled on her blond hair.

(Hu-Ha—today's sun is really strong.....hey! It's not the time to think about that right now.)

While she was thinking about all sorts of things, her finger was going forth and back in front of the button but couldn't press it.

After hesitating a long time, a voice suddenly resounded.

"Huh? Charl? What is it?"

"Fueey?"

Rather abruptly, a voice came from behind, and Charlotte, embarrassed at a 120%, rapidly turned her head.

The one standing behind her carrying shopping bags was Ichika.

"Ah, Ah, that! T-Today's sun is really bright—NO!"

"?"

"T-T-That...."

Charlotte, panicking, couldn't say a single word, and started searching in her brain at full strength, full mobilization of the 256 Charlotte-chan.

"Ca..."

"Ca?"

"I've come over to play♪"

Hehe, after that she filled her face with a smile—though after the words left her mouth, she felt extreme remorse.

(U-U-Uwaaaa. I'm so stupid, I'm so stupid!)

"Is it? Then come in. Though I can't give you a huge welcome."

"I-Is that so? Then I can come in?"

"Of course you can. I obviously can't make you go back--ah, you are free for a bit, aren't you?"

"Y-Yeah. I am! Of course I am! I'm entirely free."

Facing a response that furious, Ichika couldn't help but to step back.

Seeing Ichika's reaction, Charlotte's face became immediately red.

"It's, it's...fine."

"Haha. What a weird one~OK, please enter, the door is open."

"Hn, Hn."

Submissively nodding, Charlotte was thinking inside her head the 'what a weird one~' Ichika said, and couldn't help but to think of hiding herself in a hole.

Though after this bit of vacillation, she quickly entered , rejoicing on the thought of entering Ichika's home.

(This, this is Ichika's home....)

After thinking this far, Charlotte discovered that it was her first time entering a boy's house, and the heartbeat indicator shot up in a straight line.

"By the way, today's really hot, please sit for a moment , I'll go fetch some drinks."

"Hn, hn, thank you."

While saying this, she sat on the sofa, and started looking everywhere.

Ichika's home looks like some normal homes, being a style where the living room is close to the kitchen. There

were medieval goods bought by Chifuyu-nee everywhere. Though the things weren't new, under Ichika's care, there wasn't a single speck of dust on them.

(That's impressive, it seems that when Ichika said he was good at housework, he wasn't lying.)

When she was little, at her elementary school in France , there were also many boys who wanted to become like that.

To be honest, Charlotte also really likes people like that.

(Ichika will quickly become the househusband.....hehe , househusband.)

After saying this, for some reason she suddenly thought of her life after marriage. She immediately blushed due to the embarrassment, and showed an indistinct expression.

"Here, barley tea."

Ah!?

"Since it was made this morning, the taste is still a bit light, though I think it should be OK."

"Hn, hn, thank you."

Being sucked in her fantasy, Charlotte was suddenly called back to reality, and was scared by Ichika's presence right beside her. She immediately drank the tea to cover her panic.

Indeed the barley tea's taste is a bit light, but to Charlotte, everything is OK, since she's in a state where she's too nervous to taste anything.

(Now, I am, with I-Ichika, the two of us alone, the two of us alone....)

The speed of her heartbeats immediately increased.

(I need to talk about something....that, that.....)

Ding-dong

"Oh, it's probably the delivery service, I'll go out for a bit."

"A-Alright."

Ichika stood up and walked from the corridor to the door, as Charlotte took a deep breath.

After all, being anxious won't help in anything, being calm and think of some topic to discuss is the way.

(By the way, I don't know what Ichika likes, I'll ask him later then.)

Going back ten minutes before--

"It's here, no problem."

After checking numerous times with her navigation function included cellphone, Cecilia finally arrived in front of the doorplate.

Seeing the two large characters 'Ori-mura', she quickly checked that she had arrived at her destination. [4D 1]

(Hu, hu, hu. Today I received information about where Ichika-san lives from the class' intelligence network. It

also means that if I pay a visit, we'd be alone in our world! Indeed, it would be our own world--)

Thinking of what might happen, a layer of red was added on Cecilia's cheeks.

(It-It's certain, that, that in that atmosphere, the two of us alone.....)

For some reason, she started to imagine the scene where she's alone with Ichika, and what would follow it. Her cheeks became even redder.

"Can I? Cecilia, I love you the most."

"Ah, that kind of thing.....no, I-I am not prepared for this."

"Be it the body or the mind, I have taken all precautions."

"Aaah....."

(Something like that, something like that!)

As her cellphone suddenly started to vibrate, Cecilia was taken out of her delusions to reality, in front of the interphone.

(I must first adjust my tone.....*cough*.)

After coughing twice, Cecilia leant her hand towards the button.

Ding-dong. Ten seconds after the electrical ring resounded, the door in front of her face opened.

"I'm coming.....Huh, it's Cecilia."

"He-Hello. Are you doing fine, these days? Ichika-san, I just happened to not have anything important to do, so I wanted to come pay a visit here."

Even though it's still the same tone and the same calm attitude as always, the world inside her is already shaking wildly.

(Being casual like this and that different from normal.... ....that, he looks very cool. Today I've put my special perfume on, Hn, just in case!)

"Is that right? Then please come in."

"What, great! Of course! Ah, that, this is a cake made in a reportedly great bakery."

"Oh, oh, thank you~ please come in and take a cup of tea."

Cecilia, who was in reality excited to only enter Ichika's home, changed into the slippers, and entered the living room.

"Charl, Cecilia's here."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Without being prepared for it, Charlotte and Cecilia met each other. The two of them started to quickly analyze the current situation.

Especially Cecilia, who just placed her boots in the vestibule, seems she would be unable to say anything even if she wanted to, her mouth opening and closing.

"We'll eat the cake together in a moment, Oh, it's exactly three pieces. Though since it's too hot today, we'll cool it before eating it, so please wait a moment."

"Huh, oh, OK....."

After hearing something like 'please sit', Cecilia and Charlotte sat near each other.

"....."

"....."

Since there was no way to say anything, the silence continued to extend.

There were only some snapping sounds coming out of the kitchen, the sound of tableware being moved.

"It's, it's really a coincidental meeting, Charlotte-san."

"You're, you're right. It's really a coincidence, Cecilia."

Ufufu, ahaha, the two of them started to laugh dumbly .

""....."""

After that, the silence continued.

(Why, Why would Charlotte be here.....!? Could it be that she wants to take the lead?)

(Uuuu, why did you come here, Cecilia.....a world in which two people are alone is difficult to obtain, aaah..if only I had started the operation sooner....)

The two different blond-haired young girls sat there admiring the beautiful view, a painter or a photographer who hadn't seen Ichika's house would surely regret it.

"Sorry for the wait, which piece of cake do you want?"

Ichika took the iced red tea along with the cake Cecilia brought as a present, and they were a strawberry cake, a cheese cake and a pear tart.

"Since Cecilia was the one who bought it, please choose."

While saying that, Ichika took a chair from the kitchen for his own use.

((He clearly could come here and sit on the sofa....))

That's true. Four people can sit on the sofa, Ichika only needed to sit beside her.

However, the guests' beautiful illusions have been shattered mercilessly by Ichika.

"That, which one does Cecilia want?"

Ichika was giving out the plates to the two of them, while sharing the iced red tea.

The hot water cooled quickly as it entered in contact with the ice, and the ice cubes were rolling, making a light noise.

"Y-You are right, then, I'll choose the tart."

"Hn, OK. How about Charlotte?"

While putting the tart on a little plate and giving it to Cecilia, Ichika asked Charlotte, and it seemed that he had naturally put himself as the last one.

"I-Ichika, please choose first, I'll choose last."

"Don't say that, that would be poor manners for a host. "

After sitting for a while, and starting to become a bit sleepy, Charlotte started to attentively choose after being urged by Ichika.

"Then, I'll choose the strawberry one."

"Is that right? Take it, here."

"Th-Thanks, that, and Cecilia, thank you."

"Don't, please don't be that polite."

Facing Cecilia, who smiled as an answer to her, Charlotte suddenly felt embarrassed for having come empty-handed.

(Since, my head was filled by the thoughts of Ichika's home, I didn't have time to think of anything else.....)

After giving an excuse to herself, Charlotte decided to not blame herself for that.

(Aaah, though, would I be viewed as a rude girl..... Uuuu, maybe I already seem as one. Ah!? Is, Is it possible

that I look too childish by choosing the strawberry one.... it, it's OK, I guess....)

As Charlotte was still tangled by this, Ichika and Cecilia had already started.

"What is it? You don't want it?"

"What!? Ah, no, it's not it, itadakimasu."

With a fork, she took a little piece and placed it in her mouth, and the moderate wetness started to immediately flow, feeling the cream in her mouth being spread. Normal sponge cakes only enter the mouth and melt.

"Wow, it's delicious.....this, where did you buy it?"

"It's from the 'Lip Trick' in the underground shopping center in front of the station, and since I'm lucky today I got to buy it. Usually there are so many people that it's impossible to buy one."

After hearing Cecilia's words, she felt a little guilty.

Cecilia probably wanted to share it alone with Ichika, Charlotte thought.

"Hn, this really isn't bad, there's no way it could be done at home."

"Even though Ichika is good at cooking, this cake isn't made easily. Lip Trick's chef has already won a worldwide prize."

Ehe, after Cecilia let out those self-boasting words, Ichika's reaction is 'Oohh'.

"Then how about this, how about the three of us share with each other, Charlotte and Cecilia. That way we can have a taste of all three of them."

"Wha? That, it....."

"The, the three of us....share?"

The two of them stopped their hands mid-air, and turned towards Ichika for the meaning of this. Thus Ichika was nodding to show his certitude.

"Absolutely."

""".....!!""

The expression of the two of them instantly lit, and for a moment, it seemed that the divine light had shone upon them.

"Ah, though giving you something has a boy has already eaten wouldn't be good--"

"It won't! I just happen to need no matter what to taste the cheese cake!"

"Indeed, I also want to taste it."

After a brief eye-contact the British-French alliance was made, with Charlotte and Cecilia shaking hands inside their heads, with the 'Congratulations!' flag flowing on the sky.

"So, then, Ichika-kun, the cake..."

"Yeah, you're right, I really want to eat it."

The two of them look like little birds crying for food who opened their mouths, though there's a mix of shyness and hesitation in those two young girls' head, but they still opened their mouths.

Then, in order to deal with their racing heartbeats, the two of them clenched their fists together, like princesses waiting for their prince.

"Then, Cecilia, —Aaa-n. "

Though, he's really wooden-headed. Ichika didn't even sense the subtle change of atmosphere, and took his fork to cut another part and fed it again to Cecilia's mouth.

"Ah, um....."

While eating the cake and suppressing her heartbeats, Cecilia couldn't even perceive the taste. Her heart was beating so fast that she had trouble breathing.

"How is it?"

"It's, it's tasty, it isn't bad..... Fufu. ♪"

Not due to the cake's taste, but due to what happened just before the action, Cecilia couldn't resist a smile.

"It's, it's my turn."

"Oh, OK, OK, ——Here, Aaa—n."

"Hn...."

While the little piece of cheese cake was rolling on her tongue, Charlotte closed her eyes to feel that wonderful feeling. .....Of course, it was the feeling coming from her own heart.

To be fed directly by Ichika, it's already the second time. Though this time, the feeling is even stronger than before, by the way, it should be because Charlotte's frame of mind had changed.

"It's, it's really tasty. I like it."

Of course what she likes was certainly something else.

"Then I'll also eat a piece of it."

As Ichika began to prepare to take a piece for himself, he was immediately stopped by a sharp sound.

"Wait!"

"According to etiquette, you cannot *not* return something in exchange, hn."

"Hn, is that so? If you want it then do as you wish."

"Yes, yes, it's pretty obvious."

"This cake is really tasty, fufu♪"

While laughing giddily as they cut their own cakes, Charlotte and Cecilia took their piece of cake near Ichika's mouth.

""Here, Aaaa—n""

Facing two different cakes at the same time, Ichika was perplexed. At the end, he ate in the same order as before, eating Cecilia's first. The pear tart's sourness and sweetness in his mouth was incredibly delicious, and to add the cool jam put on the outside. The feeling of the food and its taste, it was impossible to determine which was better.

And after taking a mouthful of red tea to swallow the remaining cake in his mouth, he ate Charlotte's.

"This cake is really good ♪."

"Uh, indeed. Next time I'll go buy it."

The two girls were discussing in great delight, and at the same time took some red tea.

For some reason, they were hiding their mouths, scared that Ichika would see that girly façade.

"By the way, you two really came early, it's not even ten yet."

"Huuh, yeah. Ichika said before that he wakes up very early, so I thought that coming in the morning wouldn't be a bother."

"Hn? Though it's not like I mind, since it is summer vacation, why don't you go play somewhere with your friends?"

"It's fine, it's fine, the others already had something in their schedule, there's a day where I would be free."

"It's really, really a coincidence. I am also in the same situation, I just happened to be free today ."

"Fuu—n, so it's like that."

In fact, these two had already pushed aside all engagements for today, but would keep it as a secret until the end, since to abandon their friends to go to a boy's home isn't something wonderful to say in these two's minds.

(How, how can I say it, that....Usually I'm not the kind of girl who pays more attention to a lover than to a friend .....)

(Though I don't know what Ichika would say, I would probably be looked as a shameless girl.....)

Thus, these two simply used 'it's an unusual and coincidental free day' as an excuse to dodge the question.

"Then, what should we do, there isn't anything to play with at home, how about going outside?"

"No, no need! It's so hot outside, so let's stay at home!"

"Y-Yeah, that, for some reason I want to see Ichika's room for a bit.....like this."

"My room? It doesn't bother me if you just look around ."

From the conversation above, we can see that Charlotte and Cecilia, aside being IS pilots, are also typical maidens. It's really interesting for them to see the room of the person they like.

"Hn, OK, though why are you two so excited about it?"

"That's not the case!"

"That's right!"

"I-Is that right?...."

Facing a slightly strong opposing tone, Ichika withdrew.

"Then, let's go to my room, ah, it's on the second floor."

The two of them nodded in an imposing manner and started taking large steps, behind Ichika.

His room was pretty normal, with a 90° corner. Cecilia saw for the first time a room like this, and felt clearly that it was much smaller than her home.

(For some reason, I find it really interesting, and feel that it would be hard to transport a whole tea set.)

Charlotte felt nostalgic, remembering that when she moved to her father's, she felt like this when she started living with his mother.

(As I thought I still can't feel accustomed to luxury, it still feels more comfortable being in a place like this.)

"Right, here's Chifuyu-nee's room, please be careful not to go in, or you'll be killed."

"Ah, so, it's like that...."

"I, I see. I'm interested in where Chifuyu-sensei lives, however..."

Ahahaha, the two of them started laughing stupidly.

Ever since what happened with Chifuyu-nee during the water camp, they felt even closer to her.

"Even if it's like that, she's in fact a good person."

Those heavy words, pierced everyone's heart on the scene and hurt slightly.

(Ichika wants to see Chifuyu-sensei as a sister, so he would say this....)

(Uu—yeah.....as I thought, having Orimura-sensei as a rival, it's far from easy.)

Haa, the two of them sighed deeply, and Ichika couldn't help but turn towards them.

"What is it? As I thought, you don't want to come?"

"No! Isn't it said in the old texts something like " Nothing ventured, nothing gained."?"

"Indeed, you may as well eat the poisoned plate?"[4D 2]

"???"

Receiving this kind of answers, Ichika opened the door with a confused expression on his face.

"It isn't a very big room, so please enter."

"So-Sorry for intruding."

"Pardon for the intrusion..."

While their hearts were beating wildly, Charlotte and Cecilia entered the room. The window in front of them was letting some dazzling rays pass by, and the assailing odor of a boy's body suddenly smelled good. The two of them forcefully sniffed a bit.

"Ah, my room doesn't have any chairs, so please sit on the bed."

((On the b-bed!?))

While their hearts were beating non-stop, an electric sound was emitted from the front door.

Ding-dong.

"Hn? Who's there? I'll go see."

While saying this, Ichika went down the stairs.

"....."

"....."

Charlotte and Cecilia, who were left in the room, looked around but didn't move.

(This, this is Ichika's bed....)

(As I thought, it's different than the one from the dorms, hn....)

As the two of them were thinking about all sorts of things, the sounds of the stairs came to them.

"Cecilia, Charl, come down for a bit."

""Eh?""

After staying for less than ten minutes, Cecilia and Charlotte let out a surprised unhappy voice.

"Wh-What is it?"

"Please wait a moment."

"No, that..."

Before he even finished, there was the sound of someone going upstairs.

"Ichika, what is it.....Ah."

The one who pushed the door open was Rin.

Rin, who came countless times during elementary school and Junior High, knew Ichika's house from top to bottom, and she didn't even hesitate to push Ichika's room door open.

Although when she saw the two of them unexpectedly , her movements instantly froze.

"What, what does this mean! You two!"

Her blood rose to her head as she started shouting, and that voice had been heard by people on the first floor , and they also shouted towards the second floor.

"What is it? Why did you shout in such a loud voice?"

"Did you find people in an ambush?"

The ones who responded, were Houki and Laura.

With things developing to this point, Cecilia and Charlotte could only abandon the idea of 'expanding themselves'.

"Still, you guys didn't give me a heads up beforehand."

"You're fine, since you are free the entire morning anyway."

"Is that right?? What is it? You are bothered by the fact that we suddenly came? You want to hide your ero-books?."

While eating soba as lunch, Houki and Rin answered him. Since there were so many people, they could only hand-make some wheat food as lunch.

"I, I was too busy, after all I have been held up in the cake shop for that long."

"So-Sorry. I'll pay attention next time."

Charlotte and Cecilia who were putting the wasabi on the noodles also answered. In fact, everyone basically thought of 'Coming over♪' and then acted, and every girl there understood fully each other on that point.

"To say something random, were you happy by the surprise of me coming over?"

After drinking the noodle soup, Laura said it like this.

(What an admirable self-confidence....)

The other four girls thought of the same thing at that time.

"Then what should we do in the afternoon? Should everyone stay at home? Though I think going outside would be better."

Keke, everyone was thinking of something different while nodding.

(I specially came to Ichika's home for the day he returns.)

(What's good in going outside, stupid!)

(Why isn't there a single bit of smooth progress until now.)

(I still haven't asked what Ichika's interests are.)

(Instructor Orimura will come at night, I'm interested.)

As everyone was calculating in their minds, Houki, Rin, Cecilia, Charlotte and Laura finished eating.

"I'll tidy and then pour you some tea, so please wait a moment."

"Ah, then I'll also go."

"Hn? Is that okay? Then please, even though you are a guest. Please help me put the table in order."

"Uhn♪! Understood."

As always, Charlotte found once again an opportunity to participate, stood up and started tidying.

After that, feeling a crisis coming, Rin and Cecilia also stood up.

"I-I'll help too."

"Usually, I wouldn't do this, but I'll make an exception and help you."

"There's no need, no matter what, four people is too much, Rin and Cecilia, please rest."

"Mu....."

"B-But."

The two of them swallowed their words even if they wanted to say anything, and to not create an opposite effect, didn't insist and could only return to sitting on the sofa.

The four people sitting on the sofa were Rin, Cecilia, Charlotte and Laura, while Ichika and Houki were sitting on the floor's cushions.

"Can I wash these?"

"Sure, and don't forget the dish detergent, but I feel kind of bad letting you clean up."

"Its nothing, it's nothing, I am good in doing this, or to say.....I like it."

Though Charlotte still couldn't say 'I like you' or something like that, so she could only strike sideways.

(Ehehe, it feels as if we were newlyweds.....)

The other four were looking at the happy Charlotte.

(Muu.....as I thought, Charlotte is a strong rival.)

(Ah-Uu-, I'm completely left behind.)

(I should use Charlotte's method as a reference.)

(Fu, that kid, one can't be too careless around her.)

After Charlotte finished helping, it was time to make tea, and fifteen minutes later, everyone gathered next to the table.

"As I thought, a cup of tea after lunch is needed. Ha—, I feel great."

Who would mind drinking hot tea in the middle of summer, though that's Ichika's mentality. Cold tea before the meal, and hot tea after.

"Then what should we do now, how about playing some sort of game?"

"Hm, I thought of that much, so I specially took this with me, here."

While saying this, Rin took out a paper bag, and there were social games like Poker, Hanafuda, Monopoly and some different other games.[4D 3]

"Oh—so Rin likes things like this."

"Of course, since I can win."

Fufun—said Rin, though that was because she's pretty bad at video games.

"So let's play these, do you guys want to play that?"

While Ichika was saying this, the others were coming to see the things in the bag.

"Aside from Japanese games, there are others."

"Ah, what I want to play, is that materials-buying game."

"Oh, so that is Japan's Hanafuda, it doesn't look too bad. Next time I go back to my country, I'll buy some and take them back."

"I want to play Shogi[4D 4], but it seems that it can only be played with two players."

Facing those different games, the girls started to discuss enthusiastically. Seeing that kind of scene, and remembering being just as enthusiastic in the past with Rin, Ichika couldn't help but think of those days in Junior High.

"So everyone, let's decide what to play."

After saying that, Ichika took out a game called Barbarossa.[4D 5]

"Hau, I want to play a German game."

Raising her Germany flag to her chest and carefully examining it, Laura let out a rare happy expression.

"So what should we play, in the end?"

"How about playing the quiz game made of clay?"

"Hn? How do we play that? Who's the one who moulds better?"

"It's not like that. It's actually the opposite, since if you mould too well, it would be too easy to recognize, so it should be a bit indistinct to make it as a quiz."

"Hnn? Isn't it disadvantageous if it's too ugly?

"This depends on the questions. Guess an answer, and confirm it by questioning. The questioning concerning the modeling is the crucial point in the game."

After the experienced Rin explained the rules with Ichika, the game began.

Konekonekonekone.....

"Finished."

"Then, start."

Charlotte rolled the dice, and the game begun.

"That, one, two, three."

"Ah, it's the gem."

"Yes, so it's my turn to ask. Good, then I'll question Laura about her clay modeling."

"I understand."

"Oh yeah, and the answer can only be 'yes', 'no' or 'I don't know', and the questioning continues until there's a 'no' answered."

Hearing Rin's explanation, Houki nodded slightly, and started to examine Laura's model.

That model is a pyramid-shaped imposing object that looked still. Though not only no one knew, except Laura, everyone had on their face a 'what the heck is that' expression.

"Is it something on earth?"

"Um."

"OK..... Is it bigger than a human?"

"Yes."

It means that, it isn't some tool or anything of that sort, but even if it's bigger than a man, no one can tell what this is.

"Is it in a city?"

"How can I say it, you can say that it could be, but it's also OK to say that it is not."

This answer gave everyone a headache, and since everyone thought that it could have been the Tokyo Tower, this answer made everyone get mad.

"Is it man-made?"

"NO!"

"OK, my questioning ended, so it's Houki's turn to answer, isn't it?"

"U-Um, anyway, even if I'm wrong points won't be deducted, so I'll answer."

In a formal game you need to write it on a paper and show it to the author, though this time was only a trial, so Rin changed the rules a bit, so everyone could share the information.

"Then, what is the answer?"

"AN OILFIELD!"

Subishi!, Houki, who held out the object in question, answered.

"Wrong."

Houki answered with her head lowered, and including Ichika, every other player showed a 'why would it be an oilfield' expression of dismay.

The game still continued and it had already passed the halfway point.

"If there's still no correct answer, the one who made that thing won't have any points either."

By the way, what Charlotte did had been immediately guessed, so she didn't get any points. And on the other hand, the advancing team's model had the Barbarossa characteristic, it was invincible in terms of 'it can be whatever you want'.

In the middle of the explanation, the author and the one answering can get points.

So incidentally, Houki's model is a 'well', and Charlotte answered at the best possible moment.

Then, the last battle opposes two strong people, Laura to Cecilia.

While Laura's is that pyramid, Cecilia's looked like an intriguing cell.

"This, is it food?"

"It isn't."

"Is that thing really small?"

"No, it's very, very big."

Having their models figured out, Houki and Charlotte violently questioned Laura and Cecilia on their models with deadly intentions, but Laura's model was impossible to solve.

So finally, the game could only end.

"Then, Laura, what is that thing?"

The one questioning was Ichika, who has been holding back for long.

"Huh? Even you do not know? You are really a failure as my bride."

"What, anyways...what is the answer?"

"A mountain."

.....

"What?"

"A mountain."

"No, no, wait, WAIT! Is there a mountain that acute?"

"Jeez.....how rude. Mount Everest is like that."

"But it only limits to the Mount Everest!"

"Except Mount Everest, there are only mountains like this."

Full of confidence of her modeling, Laura wouldn't let go.

"Fine, fine, since no one answered right to Laura's model, so I'll take points out! Next, what is Cecilia's?"

"Ara. No one got the answer?"

If anyone had got it, he/she would have answered! Though they thought of saying this, they didn't say it loud.

Cecilia started making her show-off posture, lifted her right hand, made a circle in the air and said.

"It's my motherland, the UK!"

""""....."""

Everyone fell into silence. By the way, what everyone guessed before were 'rotten potato', 'unicellular substance', 'decomposed pizza', 'seaweed', 'piece of cloth worn out', 'injured dog' and 'wet cat'.

"Really, I don't need everyone to be touched like this, I recommend you to look at the world map once per day."

'Who would know what UK's form would look like!', was what everyone wanted to answer, but fell into silence. Seeing Cecilia having even more confidence in her modeling than Laura, so it made everyone have a ' want to throw a tsukkomi at her silliness'. [4D 6]

"A-Anyways, everyone should approximately know what the rules are! Then Ichika and I will enter too, so let's play together!"

The six of them gathered in front of the table, and started modeling once again.

Although the clay model made before needed to be destroyed, Charlotte's horse was so great that destroying it would give a feeling of pity. Ichika took it in his own hands looked at it and said.

"By the way, Charlotte's hands are really skillful..... don't you think that at this level, it could be used as an ornament?"

"It-It's nothing. I only added four legs to it."

"No, no. Even though it has been guessed wrongly by some others, this doesn't look like a donkey, neither does it look like a camel! As expected from Charlotte."

"Ah, thank you....."

The other four girls watched the embarrassed Charlotte from the shadows, and thought unconvincingly 'why is Charlotte the only one to be praised'.

Especially Houki, Cecilia and Laura, who were all fully confident about their models, didn't get praised by Ichika, and thus, were so angry that their cheeks were puffing up.

"Rin, since you can't tell if it's a dumpling, a meat bun or a shaomai, it's not allowed."

"Ho-How rude, it's a peach!"

"Huh, it's a peach.....doesn't the shape go too much against common sense?"

"How noisy! Don't you know only how to make Dongpo pork."[4D 7]

"Ah.....what are you talking about, did you know that I can do three layers properly? Even Dan could see it."

"That is because you always eat Dongpo pork every noon!"

Facing those two having an animated discussion about their days in Junior High, the other people looked at them with envy; but the past is the past, and it cannot be changed, so after reflecting on that point, it was decided that the thoughts should be on the future.

As time passed by, the second round started.

"I know, that's Kamaboko!"[4D 8]

"It is not! Please try harder."

"What Laura made.....is it a human.....?"

"It's not, why can't you guess right? The model is fantastic."

"I know it this time, Cecilia, what you're modeling is a tomato, isn't it?"

"Houki-san, does it look like a tomato?"

The atmosphere was really lively, so much that time passed quickly.

Though after 4 PM, an unexpected person appeared.

"What, I thought that it was too lively, so it was you guys, huh."

In front of their eyes was Chifuyu-nee.

She was wearing casual clothes, a white shirt and a pair of jeans, and it was showing her personality. The sleeveless black shirt underneath her clothes was covering her voluminous chest.

"Welcome back, Chifuyu-nee."

"Aaah, I'm home."

Ichika immediately stood up, and walked towards Chifuyu-nee, and took the bag on her right shoulder, giving the impression that he's a butler.

"Did you eat at lunch? If you didn't I'll cook some rice, what dishes do you want to eat?"

"Stupid, what time do you think it is? I've already eaten it."

"Is that so.....ah, what kind of tea do you want to drink ? Hot or iced, which one?"

"You're kind of right.....I just came from outside, so I want to drink iced——"

At that point of her sentence, Chifuyu suddenly felt an oppressive aura from the students. It was envy towards Chifuyu on how she gets treated by Ichika.

".....No, there's no need, I'll go outdoors in a moment, I have some work."

"Huh? So it's like that.....but the coffee jelly that was frozen in the morning should be eatable, I guess."

"Next time then. So, I'll go change my clothes."

"Ah! The shirt and other clothes are already out. I have taken the autumn clothes in Chifuyu-nee's bag, so don't forget them!"

"I know it."

Oh jeez, this guy seems like a good mother, was what Chifuyu thought, but she didn't say it.

Though the girls felt 'What, they look like a husband and his wife', but no one said it out loud, and even if they commented on it, they would only deepen their trouble.

Badam! Following the door sound, Chifuyu left the living room; thinking that they could finally breathe normally, the girls let out a deep breath.

"Just as always, you really like to stick to Chifuyu-san."

"Huh? Is it? Well, it's normal, since we're siblings."

"Is it? Probably only you think like that."

After seeing Chifuyu's appearance——or perhaps rather Ichika's approach towards Chifuyu, Rin's speech was full of sarcasm.

At the same time, Ichika's other childhood friend, Houki, who since long ago thought that they were really close to each other, always felt some things that couldn't be said, swirling around in her mind.

(.....Has Ichika's sister complex gone worse.....)

Thinking about the matter a month before, Cecilia's and Charlotte's mood got worse.

(Does Orimura-sensei only look at him as a younger brother.....?)

(That, that's probably not it, huh? Something like a world by themselves, two people having a crush on each other.....there should be none of that, should it?)

Laura, who thought of what happened before and that she could get over it once again, felt an abnormally jealous feeling different from before.

(Muu.....that disgraceful Ichika is clearly my wife..... but the Instructor——no, even if it's the Instructor, my

wife can't be good to anyone, besides me. It's really troublesome, but.....Muuu.....)

Everyone's thoughts fell silent, and the atmosphere in the living room became heavy.

"Huh? That? What's that! What is it?"

".....Coffee jelly."

"Hn."

"Take out the coffee jelly right now! How troublesome, you didn't take out a snack past 3 O'clock, I'm angry now !"

"Why would you be angry, doesn't Rin technically hate coffee?"

"I love coffee jelly!"

"Huuh? Didn't you say before that you didn't want....."

"I just happened to love it! I started loving it these days , so do you have an objection?"

"No, I don't have any....."

Ichika felt like a gentleman cornered and wanting to escape from Rin, and Houki took this opportunity to speak out.

"Um! That.....it happens that, I also like to eat coffee jelly....."

"Wha?"

"P-Please let me taste it!"

Since she was embarrassed of it, Houki let go of Ichika's arm, and Laura took this opportunity to say.

"Taste it.....oh yeah, I also need to taste it! You don't want the instructor to eat something strange, do you?"

"Y-Yeah? What is it, Laura?"

"I said that I want to help you taste it, take it out."

Cecilia and Charlotte also expressed themselves.

"R-Right! Please let me taste it....."

"Th-Then me too, I'll....."

"H-Hey, Hey, even Charl too.....if it's not good then don't blame me, OK?"

Ichika, who didn't have a choice, could only stand up, and go to the kitchen so that he could take out the coffee jelly from the fridge.

"Since there are exactly six, it's just enough.....though that way Chifuyu-nee's part would be gone."

"Didn't Chifuyu-nee say that she would eat it next time ?"

"You're not wrong.....Ye-ah."

Facing those girls who were prepared to succeed, Ichika, who was still bothered, wanted to say something, but suddenly the door opened.

"So, are you having an argument? As long as you're in this house, then you need to get along."

Chifuyu was wearing a suit——and those of the same gender as her felt that she had a devilish figure, and that they couldn't say anything.

And with that calm expression she went to the front door, ready to go outside.

"Ichika, today I won't get back, so you can do whatever you want! However, the girls can't stay overnight."

And with the explanation that 'There aren't enough beds', she left the living room.

"Is there some important work? Ye-ah.....then it can't be helped."

While saying this, Ichika put the coffee jelly on the table, and sat with everyone.

"Since Chifuyu-nee likes it with a strong coffee taste, if you guys need some milk, you can serve yourselves; also I didn't put any sugar in it, so I prepared some syrup."

After everyone took all they needed, they started eating slowly.

Cecilia and Laura, who were thinking at the beginning of eating the bitter black coffee jelly[4D 9] tended their hands towards the syrup and the milk.

"Fu, it's pretty good."

"You're clearly a guy, and still can do sweets? That's really surprising."

"Is it possible that Ichika knows how to make cakes?"

"Hn~I only know how to make some easy sponge cake ——it's only the type of cake where you mix the fruits and milk."

"It sounds delicious, when can you try making one?"

"When I have the opportunity."

"Instructor eats your handmade food every day, I'm envious."

"This isn't something really impressive. Aah, right, until what time will you girls stay? If you stay until the evening, then if I don't go to buy ingredients right now——"

After hearing Ichika saying those words, the girls' eyes started to sparkle.

"I'll cook the rice for the evening! I'll do this as a special thanks for today's coffee jelly."

"Yeah, I still haven't showed my skills yet!"

"Then, then I'll also help with it."

"I'll also participate. When I was in the army, I learnt how to cook, so look forward to it!"

"By the way, you haven't eaten my cooking in a while, so you should be yearning for that taste, aren't you?"

No, I'm not——thinking of Cecilia's silliness, Ichika looked at the clock.

"Then I'll go out around 5 o'clock. There's a store near here, so I'll go there to buy things."

Everyone started to talk with each other. After eating the jelly they continued on chatting.....like this, time passed quickly.

"Sorry for making you wait."

The one who was gasping and arriving at the underground bar between a store and the train station——was Yamada-sensei, Yamada Maya.

That bar's open hours were from four in the afternoon to eight in the morning, and its name was 'Bar Crescendo '. It was a bar full of adults who came in contact with each other, and also where Chifuyu was often welcomed.

"I'm sorry, calling you out in a rush like that."

"It's fine, it's fine. Anyway, if I stay at my room I'll only look at the shopping catalog."

Maya sat near the counter, and Chifuyu immediately asked the owner for a cup of normal beer with black beer mixed together——of course it was for Maya.

"Does Chifuyu-san also want to try something new?"

"Yeah, sorry for bothering you."

"I got it."

That bar was managed by a sole aged owner——with his beard and his white hair pulled back, his appearance was attracting many female customers.

Though Chifuyu didn't really like the owner, but she was more attracted by his soothing voice.

"Please help yourself."

The owner took out Maya's beer and Chifuyu's black beer, and then took out slices of cheese for the clients, but placed them while being at a bit of distance from them——after many years of experience, he knew that there's no way to have a good chat with people who he isn't familiar with.

"Cheers."

The sound of two glass cups coming into contact resounded. Maya took little sips, while Chifuyu was joyfully savoring it slowly, the cup tilted a bit.

After drinking around half of the content, Maya asked a question.

"What is it today? Isn't it vacation time, so why don't you go home?"

"I was thinking of doing so, but there are girls at home right now."

"Girls? Oooh——could they be Ichika's friends?

"Aaah, yes, and also our students——to phrase it another way, they are all familiar faces."

"You mean the six personal machine users? They would all be strong in a war."

"Don't joke with it."

While saying that and smiling, Chifuyu ate a slice of cheese.

"Wouldn't Orimura-sensei be bothered by it? If your little brother has a girlfriend."

"You're kinda right....."

The beer was just finished, so Chifuyu asked for another cup from the owner.

After she finished her fourth in a shot, Chifuyu continued and said,

"Last month, did something happen at the sea-side school?"

"Huhh, yeah, concerning that I still remember that..... many things happened."

"Maa, putting aside the Gospel story first.....I feel that I said things that I shouldn't have said at that time."

".....What did you say?"

Maya asked her with her interest showing. This was the first time that she had seen her so hesitant, so what could be the reason? She was interested to the maximum.

"I said to those five girls..."

"Yes."

"I said '**I won't let you have Ichika'**."

".....What?"

Maya, who had been surprised, asked back, since it was rare that Chifuyu would be embarrassed and have much to say. It was probably because she was drinking.

"It's not.....like that.....no, didn't I say before that I don't have special feelings towards that guy, but how can I say it.....a little brother should belong to his older sister, right?"

"Maybe that is what it feels like this.....but I'm an only child."

"A-Anyway, it there's no weird meaning to it. Though.....it seems that those girls look at me as a love rival, so I am bothered by it."

At the same time Maya's cup was also empty. As she ordered another, the silence continued.

"That.....Orimura-sensei, towards Orimura-kun——Aah, how complicated——towards Ichika-kun going out with a girl, are you for or against it?"

"Of course I would be in favor of it. That guy could learn more about different things——not only about managing with people, but also especially towards girls."

"Isn't it good like this?"

"I-It's not."

Whaat~.....thought Maya in her mind.

"It's not good, maybe should I say that I'm scared to see him seduced by another girl. That guy really doesn't have an eye for girls."

"Haa. So Orimura-sensei is concerned about Ichika-kun——"

"It's, it's not concerned, that guy can decide by himself. "

Whaat~.....Maya though that once again.

"Then what do you mean, in the end? Is it 'You can't go out with a girl that I don't acknowledge!' or something like that?"

"I feel that there's a slight difference.....Aaah, I don't know how to say it."

Chifuyu tilted her cup, and drank the strong black beer in large gulps.

"Owner, another cup."

"Yes, just a moment."

The owner gave her another cup of beer, and she drank half of it in one shot.

"Anyways, that's the reason why I went out today. Though they are young maidens in their teens, who took their courage to come to our home, I can't bother them."

"Fufu, Orimura-sensei and Ichika-kun are a lot alike."

——Especially the part where they don't have a limit to their kindness.

"What, which parts are we alike? Maya, you really don't have an eye for guys."

"Maybe so? Fufufu."

"Muu....."

The young Maya looked like a younger sister making fun of her older sister, and that made Chifuyu laugh and angry at the same time, making her mood complex. She ended up drinking the beer left in one shot.

"Then I'll keep you company until morning."

"Fuun, how great would these words sound if you say them to a man."

"Yeah, if there's someone who has more manliness than you, then I'll do that."

Said Maya mischievously while gazing at Chifuyu.

"Then the owner would be good! I recommend him."

"Chifuyu-san, don't make fun of an oldie like me."

While saying that, the owner brought a drink which wasn't black beer——it was a Salty dog cocktail[4D 10], and the glass was rimmed of salt, and it was as beautiful as snow.

"......I haven't ordered anything."

"I thought it was about the time you would like to drink."

"Fuun.....there are only noisy people around me."

Chifuyu, despite wanting to insult someone badly and to protest a bit against the fact that her mood has been looked through, took a light sip.

Seeing her behaving like a child throwing a tantrum, Maya and the owner didn't say anything.

"We are also being loved, isn't that right, owner?"

"Yeah."

"Then, I, who seems to be a noisy person, will go do other things"——after saying this, the owner walked to the kitchen.

Still having the expression of a child throwing a tantrum, Chifuyu put all the remaining cheese in her mouth.

"Everyone has grown.....many things did, and many things happened too."

"Fuun, speaking like a person well over her years."

"Wh-What? Jeez! How dare you make fun of me, how mean!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Facing Chifuyu, who was bursting out with laugher, Maya puffed up her cheeks.

The ice cubes in the Salty dog cocktail, as if they were watching those two, clattered.

The scene switches to the Orimura household——there, it currently seemed like there were warriors preparing to die on a battlefield, and the battle was becoming even more intense.

"Hn.....sho! Aaah, jeeze.....that potato is hard to cut."

Though the movements weren't dangerous, when Rin peeled the potato, there was even flesh taken off with the peel.

Beside Rin was the one who 'should' know how to make braised beef, Cecilia, who was bluntly putting tomatoes in the cooking pot.

"How weird, why isn't the color the same as the picture shows? There isn't enough red!"

"H-Hey, don't put that much.....Ah! The fire's too strong!"

"Don't worry, Houki, my food is often meant to be ready at the end."

"Food isn't about fighting or winning....."

Houki, who was wearing a hat and an apron, let out a sigh. She was working hard to make her own food——today's dish was curry.

"What is Charlotte doing? Grilled chicken?"

"It isn't Laura, it's fried chicken, I am doing the seasoning now."

"Fumu, so it's like that."

While saying that, Laura was beautifully peeling white daikons. Her manipulation of a knife was near professional level, even the experts would hold their breath.....since she was using a sword as a knife.

"Wah, Laura, I feel that you're really good! Where did you learn these knife skills."

"You just need to watch, I'm only copying the tricks in the television."

"Being that great by just copying....."

"Maybe because I've been using knifes for so long; if you are in a jungle and you can't deal with wood, you can't make traps or such."

"Th-That's true.....what dish are you making?"

"Oden."[4D 11]

.....

"Oden."

"No, you don't need to repeat twice.....but isn't that winter food?"

"It isn't said that you can't eat that in summer."

"You aren't wrong by saying that.....ah, Laura, do you have more daikons for me? Ichika said just before that he would like smashed daikons with fried chicken."

"....."

"Laura?"

Dang! Laura suddenly cut the radish in half.

"——Aaah, sorry, I was too focused just before, so I didn't hear anything. What did you say?"

"Huh, that.....if you have more daikons, I would like....."

"So it's like this, I got it."

Dong! Laura precisely cut five inches of the daikon.

"——I cut!"

Dong! *Dong!* *Dong!* The way the eye-patched girl with an apron cuts a daikon, gives people a feeling of surrealism.

Looking at the scene of these girls cooking food together, Ichika was worried to death, and frequently looked towards the kitchen.

Though he had been asked to go watch TV, he was worried to death about whether they could really make delicious food.....by the way, in that situation, the biggest victim would be Ichika's stomach.

(I-It should be OK.....I guess.....? They should be able to cook edible food.....I guess?)

"Fun~♪Funfu~n♪"

Rin, who finally finished cutting the vegetables was humming while cooking; though after peeling that much flesh with the skin feels like a waste, and Ichika is very mindful of that.

Right, he remembered that a novel author once said this to him on the edge of the sea.

"**I'll tell you what's good with time——it's that it'll surely pass.**"

Then another quote:

"**I'll tell you what's bad with time——it's that it'll surely come.**"

Right, that time has come.....

"....."

Seeing those five girls with their hand-made dishes, the ones which stood out the most were as he thought, Cecilia and Laura's dishes.

"How is it, Ichika-san, maybe it should be said like this ——that is the result of my confidence."

That braised beef only *looks* perfect, and from the very beginning there was a really spicy smell.

(Are they Mexican spices? Since you wanted to make it that red, so you added Mexican spices? Cecilia!)

Then, Laura's part.....how can I say it.....

"That it's Oden, there's only meat in it; it looks like a BBQ."

Though it's only carrots, eggs, bamboo rings and konjac[4D 12] connected, it doesn't look normal——it should be something poached, so why would it have a burnt color.....why is it brown-colored?

(This, isn't this.....the so-called 'Manga-oden'.....?)

Ichika really didn't want to think about how it was made.

Then, beside it was Rin's dish.

"Then, it seems that my Nikujaga[4D 13] looks the most delicious, isn't it?"

Though the one who made it seemed proud of it, the potatoes were cut into really small pieces, and why are they even smaller than the beef cubes? Was it over-cooked.....it doesn't seem so.

(No, at least the taste is fine, Rin's dish is only a bit like 'that' in the appearance.)

After encouraging himself, Ichika's eyes turned to the ' safe food' area.

He saw the fried chicken Charlotte made, and also the curry Houki made. At the beginning, he thought that they should eat a bit more, so he asked them to do these dishes, though in fact, he should have only asked those two to cook——Ichika started to regret his decision.

(Aaahm it looks really delicious.....Charl cut the fried chicken exactly so it can fit in a mouth, and Houki always knew how to prepare dishes. Yup, I really want to finish these.)

Though I've said that, the result will probably be miserable or cruel, isn't it? Since they already cooked that much, I should be happy from the bottom of my heart.

Though he was thinking that, there was really no way he could say 'It tastes bad' to someone who worked that hard——and that was Ichika's weakness.

"Then, everyone please eat! I'm not used with just sitting beside these dishes and waiting to eat, and I'm pretty hungry."

"You're right, then let's eat supper."

"Ichika, where are the smaller plates? Please bring them."

"Then I'll go fetch the drinks."

"To taste everyone's dishes like that, I think that it's pretty embarrassing.....though it's not bad."

"At this time you should say that you're **happy**, isn't that right? Laura."

Yes, happy, Ichika also feels like that.

When he's preparing dishes for Chifuyu, he also feels really happy, but that happiness and this happiness are different——this happiness is closer to joy.

"So? Let's start eating!"

Facing everyone in front of the table, Ichika took the initiative and said.

"Itadakimasu!"

Compared to the food's taste itself——the feeling of everyone cherishing the warmth of eating everyone's dishes with each other, was present through that summer's evening.

Epilogue: The Phantom Lurking in the Darkness

"——Above is the report about how to deal with Orimura Ichika."

Three girls were gathered around a table in a small, slightly dark room.

Two of them were sitting on chairs, and another person was standing in the center, like subjects to the queen, and a serious tension filled the room.

"It should be time to move on....."

Said the woman standing in the middle, though even with a small, but really clear voice, the words could still arrive to the other two's ears.

"Honestly, concerning that case, I think the response is too slow."

"Since there are people urging from many parties..... we can't wait anymore....."

Waiting for the queen's answer, the subjects' attention shifted to the table.

Facing the fact that this year's personal machine users reached an abnormal number, the three of them could not help but to develop serious countermeasures to this.

"......Hn."

The queen who was looking through the window delicately shifted towards them.

"I've decided, it should be time to act, we need to think for ourselves."

"So?"

"I'll find an opportunity to get close to him, and you two will be backups."

"U-Understood!"

"I got it....."

A light smile appeared on the queen's face.

Like a predator who found its prey.

Like the queen of an icy mountain.

——Quietly, without stopping.

That was a smile that would charm you right away.

"Please become aware of me, Orimura Ichika."

With the moon on her back, the woman let out a smile.

Pa! The sound of a fan getting folded, quietly but assuredly resounded——

Afterwords

Hello everyone, I'm Yumizuru. I'm sorry for delaying the sales, mainly because I was sick...

Everyone, please take care of your bodies. I may have to write on the hospital bed next time.

So, how does everyone feel about this? The 4th volume ' girls summer vacation' (Girls Side-Summer Vacation) is a short story. Yes, a short-story...a substitute name for hell...

My first published novel (not under the name Yumizuru) was a short story, but it was really tough. I won't do it again! I won't do it again! Even though I thought about that...I still did it, uu.

If you ask me what's the hard part, it's simply that it's 4 times the story process. Ugh—

But I thought that these stories should be able to create interesting content, and the readers could unexpectedly find another side to the characters. Isn't this interesting? It's delightful to write it, but tiring.

But, well, this method can easy reflect the readers' hopes. One day, I hope to rank the stories one wished to read. Of course, I'll write the top 4 stories.

...I don't know when though, so please wait patiently! The future's in the reader's hands!

I'll like to thank Okiura-sensei for providing the wonderful illustrations for the 4th volume.

Oh yeah, as according to my suggestion, there was an illustration of the second phase of the Byakushiki ' Setsura'.

Why is an illustration of the 3rd volume inside? The answer's simple. 'It will never appear in the future'.

In the 5th volume, there will be a lot of new characters and new ISes, so I thought of letting Ichika appear on the color illustrations, ya...

But, how does it feel? It's great to see such a wonderful illustration, right? I feel that it's amazing.

This time, I will also introduce another person. The mangaka in charge of drawing the IS manga, Akaboshi Kenji-sensei. Please applaud him~

The manga's really great, really cute and really exciting, so I hope that everyone reads it. It will be solved in May Alive serial publication. I'm looking forward to it! I really which to use a kinnikuman(laughs).

Speaking of which, it's finally in manga form thanks to the readers. Thank you. I guess I can only use a good work to repay everyone.

Sometimes, the way I work is different from other authors.

As I used to work in the gaming industry, I often felt that 'I had to decide what kind of illustrations are need'. As it was a work made with my own soul, it can't do if even I think that 'it'll be bad if he does it'.

Thus, I found Okiura-sensei and Akaboshi Kenji-sensei myself. Though I don't know how others work, if possible, I would decide on everything on my own. If not , I would start grumbling if I failed.

Thus, I gave suggestions on all the illustrations. Mn, I'm a weirdo in this world. Ahaha.

So, it's very difficult to write the script and give details on the illustrations.

But it was worse when creating games. Though I was the project supervisor, planner and scriptwriter, I had to give details on the script, background, music, sound effects. I also had to adjust the fstudio, write the script, write sidelines to the script and plan the whole operation out'. It was crazy...

Anyway, editing is really tough, and it can't be delayed. Because the recording couldn't be done if it's late. After that, I had to put the unrecorded parts in the plans for the next project (dies).

Speaking of which, and this is unrelated to my health, I

felt a lot of setbacks when writing, like they were some psychological crisis. Why does this happen to me every month? Unbelievable.

Even so, I will continue to motivate myself and write. I can get lots of motivation from reading the readers' comments in the questionnaire. To the readers who answered the questionnaires, thank you.

There will be a lot of different story scenarios happening in the 5th volume, so please look forward to it . That'll be the end for now.

--Yumizuru Izuru A certain day in February, 2010.

Translation Notes and References

Chapter 1

1. ↑ Barley Tea
2. ↑ Around 30 US$
3. ↑ Original text is:Yattaaaa! Yatta, Yattaa!
4. ↑ After checking with the Japanese version, it's ' hekigan', or 'blue eyes'
5. ↑ Fantasizing could be replaced by salivating
6. ↑ T\N : You know, holding a part of the dress and bow down...
7. ↑ Rin voices her wish to kill Ichika. But in the next line, it seems Ichika thought she was talking about someone on *her* end of the phone.
8. ↑ T/L: The name of an obstacle race

Chapter 2

1. ↑ Baka is Japanese for "Stupid" or "Idiot".
2. ↑ Aniki means big brother, it is normally a tougher and more masculine way of saying it.
3. ↑ Kawaii is japanese for cute, but since it has become popular even for non-japanese people, it has been left untranslated here.
4. ↑ Space Runaway Ideon

Chapter 3

1. ↑ Shinto ritual dance, to make it short.
2. ↑ Two things. First, the Earth god is more a Chinese deity than a Japanese one. At least I've never heard of a Japanese Earth god, since that's in Taoism, unless I have mistaken the term. Secondly, the New Year in this context should be something like the Chinese New Year, and not the western one. I do not think a Shinto shrine has any connection with Jesus or so.
3. ↑ ー, "Itsutou Itsusen"
4. ↑ "Nitoryuu" refers to dual weapon wielding (ie: One weapon in each hand). Here Houki is using a sword in one hand and a fan in the second hand.
5. ↑ い! "I, iu, iou, Ieba, iutoki...iu"
6. ↑ Chibi means "Small" or "Small-Sized", also "Super deformed".

Chapter 4

1. ↑ Kanji is 織. Thus the use of "two large words".
2. ↑ "As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb." is a pretty good equivalent.
3. ↑ Hanafuda is a game that uses Flower cards with the same name. Originated in Japan.

4. ↑ Also known as Japanese Chess
5. ↑ Barbarossa is a plasticine-shaping German-style board game for 3 to 6 players.
6. ↑ The smart guy in a silly act who corrects the idiot harshly. See Tsukkomi
7. ↑ Dongpo pork is a Huangzhou dish which is made by pan-frying and then red cooking pork belly. Also, it is to not be confused with kakuni.
8. ↑ Kamaboko is a type of cured surimi, a Japanese processed seafood product, in which various white fish are pureed, combined with additives such as MSG, formed into distinctive loaves, and then steamed until fully cooked and firm.
9. ↑ That is the coffee being bitter. Not the feeling of bitterness.
10. ↑ Salty dog should be a mix of vodka and grapefruit juice.
11. ↑ Oden is a Japanese dish, usually, as Charl said, eaten in winter.
12. ↑ The 'konjac' in Japanese is 'konnyaku'. It is a type of plant which you put in Oden.
13. ↑ Nikujaga is basically a stew of beef, potatoes and onion.